

THREE

Going to and Becoming Ourselves
Transformation and Covenants in *Parashat
Lech Lecha* (Genesis 12:1–17:27)

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Throughout *Parashat Lech Lecha*, people’s bodies, names, and relationships change profoundly to signal transformation and covenantal belonging. Even the name of the parasha, “Go to Yourself,” implies change and risk, a simultaneous movement from one figurative place to another, as well as a metaphorical homecoming. These significant themes emerge several times throughout the multilayered text, offering a potentially resonant narrative for queer people to understand afresh the transformations in their own histories, identities, and covenantal relationships.

The text begins with the patriarch Abram’s journey from the land of his birth into Egypt, where he risks everything to travel to an unfamiliar place. Abram’s wife, Sarai, also puts herself at risk—to pass as Abram’s sister—as a way to prevent potential violence against them during their sojourns in a new place. In the process, Sarai is “outed” as Abram’s wife, and they are cast out of Egypt, prompting another journey back to Canaan. How many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have left their homes for uncertain journeys, to set off in search of new selves and communities? How many have broken with their past or have experienced painful brokenness with their families of origin? When reading “Go to Yourself,” queer people remember so many of their own “ancestors”—people such as Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and Harry Hay. Like Abram and Sarai, these pioneers left behind aspects of their past and their homes and forged new, often uncertain, paths. They took enormous risk in order to fully “go to themselves” and create new ways of being at home in the world. As queer writer Paul Monette said, “Home is the place you get to, not the place you came from.”¹

Covenant in *Lech Lecha* is marked not just by physical and spiritual journeys but also by physical changes to the body. After the couple returns to Canaan, the barren Sarai creatively, if problematically, solves her infertility challenges by asking her servant, Hagar, to act as a surrogate. Only after much anguish, jealousy, and triangulated hardship with Hagar and Abram is Sarai able to have a child and create another generation.

The most obvious transformation in “Go to Yourself” comes at the end, with the Divine outlining the ritual of circumcision, a physical marking that literally inscribes

a sign of the covenant on the bodies of Abram and his male descendants. And the most public covenant marked by a transformation takes place when the Divine changes people's names: Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. In these acts of renaming, the Divine culturally and linguistically calls out, creating a new covenantal relationship with two people now figuratively reborn into their new names and identities. The addition of an *h* (*hey* in Hebrew) to both Abram's and Sarai's names symbolizes an abbreviated version of the Divine name (the tetragrammaton, *Yud-Hey-Vov-Hey*) and binds them in sacred connection to God and to each other every time their names are uttered or recorded. Even the Divine changes names, transitioning from Adonai to El Shaddai (Gen. 17:1). Hebrew is a grammatically gendered language, and Jews often characterize and interpret *Adonai*, which registers with the word "Lord," as masculine. However, if we read this text through a queer and gendered lens, in the changing of names from Adonai to El Shaddai, the Divine is turned upside down and renamed as "the Sacred Breast" (the word *shad* means "breast"). Name changes, then, mark *both* parties of the covenant.

Changing names to mark spiritual and physical transformation is thus a deeply Jewish value and is also common among queers, especially transpeople. Transpeople often mark their own journeys by changing names, and like God changing her name to reflect the new covenant with Abraham and Sarah, people in covenantal relationships with transpeople often also change names. When a child transitions, "daughters" become "sons," and a new covenantal relationship takes place. It is not just queers but also converts to Judaism, immigrants, and others who take on new names to reflect profound, new relationships.

Within the context of queer and feminist discourse, these *ritual, linguistic, and embodied* (particularly with regard to reproduction and circumcision) manifestations of covenant hold many layers and meanings. Covenants imply power, a sign of one's loyalty to the Divine, to other individuals, and to specific tribes or peoples. They are also signifiers of commitment and are guidelines for our behavior, bodies, and relationships. We embark on a range of journeys to "go to" and find ourselves as queers and as Jews. But how might we find useful wisdom in this text to think about our own covenantal relationships, families, and communities? Can a ritual involving "marking" (symbolic or real) be a signifier of queer Jewish inclusion or exclusion? How do gender and power inform covenant, identity, changes in the physical body, and spiritual and emotional transformations?

The covenants in *Lech Lecha* (and throughout the Torah) are relationships between the Divine and the Israelites and among ordinary people themselves. Mutuality is inextricably embedded in a covenant, even when the balance of power between the contractors is not equal, as when the Presence instructs, directs, or outlines the covenantal promise and changes the names and bodies of those covenanting.

In our own lives, we might think of covenantal relationships as those that involve a sense of the sacred, a mutually agreed upon contract, which is often imbued with solemnity and endurance and always entails ongoing negotiation, change, and evolution. As in Torah, covenants today still imply power, loyalty, commitment, some explicit boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable to do, and allegiances to

specific people or tribes or families. But unlike the covenantal relationships outlined in *Lech Lecha*, we like to think that the ideals of contemporary feminist and queer covenants are often characterized by true egalitarianism, partnership, and empathy, rather than by inherently unequal power dynamics underneath a veneer of mutuality. In an ideal world, we like to think of our society's most solemn covenant, marriage, as a bringing together of equals.²

For queer Jews, social change and ritual or spiritual practices are not mutually exclusive; nor do they exist in a political vacuum. So too was Abram and Sarai's covenant with God, which both changed society by launching monotheism and began a historical narrative that climaxed at Sinai and fostered new forms of spiritual and ritual practice. Although there are many Jewish political activists who consider themselves secular Jews, and religious Jews who may not be political activists, certainly *Lech Lecha* teaches that the spirit and social action are inextricably linked.

In this vein, Jewish feminists and queer people have begun to reinvent Jewish rituals to acknowledge new ways of creating covenantal relationships charged with political and social meaning. Most of these innovations involve the celebration of intimate relationships and family, as well as new language, liturgy, and ritual to "mark" what is sacred and meaningful in our lives, to create covenants with one another and with our families and communities. Many queer family constellations reflect models of chosen family that extend far beyond the traditional template; these models more closely resemble the rich and diverse family structures of our Biblical ancestors than they do any mainstream traditional nuclear family in contemporary Western societies.

Not surprisingly, queer rabbis, academics, and activists have offered new rituals that echo and draw on the covenantal elements outlined in *Lech Lecha*, particularly regarding the boundaries and obligations that characterize sacred relationships (between human beings and between humans and the Divine). These new rituals affirm the lives of women, queers, and others and sanctify the covenants of those who have too often been excluded or ignored in more traditional Jewish settings and theologies. In this vein, queer and allied writers have created blessings and rituals that sanctify coming out, queer weddings, insemination at a doctor's office, divorce texts for same-sex couples, and a prayer for transgender people who are transitioning into new selves and bodies.

For example, scholar Rachel Adler has created a non-gender-specific *Brit Ahuvim* (Lovers' Covenant), deeply grounded in Jewish textual traditions. She writes,

The agreement into which [the partners] are entering is a holy covenant like the ancient covenants of our people, made in faithfulness and peace to stand forever. It is a covenant of protection and hope. . . . It is a covenant of distinction, like the covenant God made with Israel. . . . It is a covenant of devotion, joining hearts like the covenant David and Jonathan made. . . . It is a covenant of mutual lovingkindness like the wedding covenant between God and Zion.³

Adler's *Brit Ahuvim* is likely to resonate with queer Jews for a variety of reasons. First, it provides a radical alternative to the *ketubah* (marriage contract), a document

whose roots and intentions, although granting women some legal protections in the case of divorce or death, were clearly patriarchal. Second, Adler reclaims the concept of covenant and imbues it with explicitly feminist underpinnings of egalitarian partnership and mutuality. The *Brit Ahuvim* reflects a growing body of contemporary Jewish ritual and liturgy with enormous relevance for queer Jews.

Another radically creative and moving new ritual is a trans/genderqueer Jewish wedding by Rabbi Elliot Kukla, the first ordained transgender rabbi in the Reform Movement. Rabbi Kukla has written a ceremony that incorporates flexibility and choice into the Hebrew blessings to maximize the recognition of each individual's gender identity before the entire *kahal* (community) that has assembled to witness a couple's covenant to each other. In explaining the rationale for his choice of different Hebrew and English options, Kukla writes, "It is possible to indicate gender subtly within the liturgical flow of the service. This is a spiritually significant moment for these lovers and they deserve to be seen and recognized as fully as possible."⁴

In *Lech Lecha*, when the Source instructs Abram to mark all the (male) members of the tribe through the covenant of circumcision, the ritual serves as an important transition to "set oneself apart" from others, to create transformation through exclusionary boundaries of belonging. In our world, Adler's "provisions of the covenant" highlight how covenants set couples apart for one another in sacred ways that enhance mutual reciprocity, companionship, an ethic of care, and a "commitment of a life of kindness and righteousness." But in contrast to this idea of setting apart, the new rituals available to feminist and queer people mark journeys through inclusion and envision wider and more welcoming circles of transformation. Likewise, Kukla's flexible Hebrew blessing formulations allow space for queer Jews to "read themselves" into traditional Jewish covenantal texts that honor the complexities of gender and sexual orientation. When queers read *Lech Lecha* or want to craft meaningful ways to celebrate and signify transformative changes and their deepest commitments and covenants, they no longer need to feel excluded or alienated either from traditional texts or from Jewish ritual. There are fruitful opportunities to find meaning and insight in both.

The characters in *Lech Lecha* embarked on risky journeys to cultivate their covenantal relationships and families. In this parasha, as in our own lives, people change, they take risks with enormous leaps of faith, and they exercise power, even if unskillfully sometimes. And unfortunately, we, just like the characters in *Lech Lecha*, also demonstrate the capacity for cruelty and the ability to inflict suffering on those closest to us. But like the extraordinary and larger-than-life characters in *Lech Lecha*, we also possess the capacity for empathy and hope, to create individual lives, intimate relationships, extended families, and queer communities that are covenanted, meaningful, and sacred.

In *Lech Lecha*, many things considered impossible happen when the Divine intervenes and promises a covenantal relationship. For queer and feminist Jews, participating in Jewish communal life through publicly celebrated covenantal rituals was once thought of as impossible. We know that this is no longer the case, not because of a Divine promise of covenant but because of years of hard work creating meaning,

ritual, and places for LGBT people in the community. We envision a day when feminist Jews in the Orthodox world, transgender Jews across all denominations, and the relationships between queer folks everywhere will be recognized and embraced fully, in Jewish communities and in civil society. As queer Jews, we love the translation of *Lech Lecha* as “Go to Yourself,” because our journey leads us to and reflects our authentic expression of our fullest selves. Simultaneously, and equally important, “going to ourselves” reaffirms our place in Jewish history and continuity, just as Abram and Sarai did when they embraced their covenant with the Divine. With a covenant that embraces all aspects of our identities, we celebrate, witness, and “go forth” toward ourselves from this contemporary moment of Jewish cultural and political transformation.

NOTES

1. Paul Monette, *Halfway Home* (New York: Crown, 1991), 262.

2. We wrote this essay soon after the state of California legally recognized marriages for same-sex couples in 2008, and shortly after the death of lesbian activist Del Martin, who was one of the first queer people to marry her partner, Phyllis Lyon, after fifty-five years of commitment. Consequently, the political significance of certain covenants seems particularly relevant to us at this historical moment.

3. Rachel Adler, “B’rit Avuhim—Lovers’ Covenant,” [ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/intimacypartnering/Jewishweddingscommitmentceremonies/sitefolder.2005-06-07.7123390896/copy_of_16loverscovenant.xml), http://www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/intimacypartnering/Jewishweddingscommitmentceremonies/sitefolder.2005-06-07.7123390896/copy_of_16loverscovenant.xml.

4. Elliot Kukla, “Trans/Gender Queer Jewish Wedding Service, [ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/intimacypartnering/Jewishweddingscommitmentceremonies/sitefolder.2005-06-07.7123390896/primaryobject.2008-02-11.6051078310), <http://www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/intimacypartnering/Jewishweddingscommitmentceremonies/sitefolder.2005-06-07.7123390896/primaryobject.2008-02-11.6051078310>.