

The Curse of Beauty in Lech Lecha

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BH

Now that the Torah's action has moved out of the Garden and of the Ark, we are in the Wild West of human nature. We are no longer in a confined, God-designed space. And it turns out that in this territory, things we thought were reliably true aren't so simple anymore. Leaving your family is a good thing. Lying is ok. And beauty turns out to be a curse, not a blessing.

Let's explore that last bit, as it's going to turn out to be important later on in Genesis. Avram leaves home with his wife Sarai. You have to imagine what it's like to be Sarai. You've lived in the fertile Tigris and Euphrates area, your husband unilaterally decides that the whole family is relocating to... the Judean Desert!?! At least there's the Jordan River. But when you arrive in Canaan it doesn't seem to matter because you've walked right into a famine. So now you have to move to the other great river culture of that time: Egypt on the Nile.

That's when we find out about Sarai's beauty. It's important to remember that the Torah is an extraordinarily terse document, so any adjective at all stands out as if it's in blinking, neon letters. As Avram and Sarai (their names haven't changed yet) are entering Egypt, Avram tells Sarai to say that she is Avram's sister, not his wife. This is necessary because she is "a woman of beautiful appearance (Genesis 12:11)." Avram predicts that Pharaoh will take one look at Sarai and decide she is for him. Avram would obviously get in the way of those plans if he were the husband so he figures he'll be summarily executed if the truth is known.

And, in fact, Pharaoh gets a look at Sarai and she is "very pretty (Genesis 12:14)." Pharaoh, thinking that Avram is now his brother-in-law, enriches him while bringing a curse upon himself. When the truth becomes known, Avram and Sarai leave Egypt with all the gifts Avram acquired.

Discussion Questions

1. There are some things I want you to keep in mind, because they will be very important later on in the Torah:
 - a. Someone very pretty goes down to Egypt with a "borrowed identity."
 - b. That someone is instrumental in the development of the entire story of the Jewish people.
 - c. The "very good looking person" is subjected to some sort of sexual impropriety. (If the relationship with Pharaoh were not consummated, why would he be cursed?)
2. The Torah is absolutely silent as to Sarai's feelings on this entire matter. She goes along with Avram's plan but how does she feel once she's a part of Pharaoh's household? Is she pleased? Feeling betrayed? Is she angry when she has to return to Avram and go back to the desert?
3. Why does the Torah put such a heavy emphasis on Sarai's looks?
4. Why does the text not betray the slightest embarrassment at Avram's behavior?
5. In all of God's communications with Avram in this Torah portion, is Sarai involved in any way? If so, what might God have said to convince Sarai to leave home to go to points unknown?

As always, looking forward to your insights!

Chag Sameiach!