

Parsha Ponders

Lech Lecha | November 8, 2019 | 10 Marcheshvan 5780

*Gifts of persuasion*¹

אמרי נא אחותי את למען ייטב לי בעבורך וחיתה נפשי בגללך

Please say that you are my sister, so that it will be good for me for your sake, and my life will be spared because of you²

Due to a severe famine in the land of Canaan, Avraham and Sarah journeyed to the land of Egypt. Knowing full-well the morality of such a place, Avraham was very concerned. His wife was tremendously beautiful, and if the Egyptians knew they were a married couple, they would have no problem killing Avraham and taking Sarah as their wife. However, if they represented themselves as siblings, they would be safe. They would assume Avraham, as Sarah's "brother", was her protector, and could be persuaded to give her away in marriage.

Avraham asked Sarah to go along with this ruse, so that it would be good for him. Rashi explains³ that Avraham expected that if they did this plan, they would give him lots of gifts, in order to persuade him. How can we understand this? Avraham was afraid for their lives, and his mind was on monetary matters? Furthermore, we see later⁴ that Avraham was clearly not a greedy person. He refused spoils from war that were rightfully his⁵. Why did Avraham express interest in receiving gifts through his ruse?

We can perhaps glean Avraham's intention from a seemingly unrelated story, one which occurred almost two thousand years later. Onkelos, who's known for his famous translation of the Torah into Aramaic, was originally a Roman pagan. He publicly converted to Judaism, severely irking the Roman emperor⁶. The emperor sent a troop of soldiers after him, in order to execute him for his treason. Upon arriving at Onkelos' home to arrest him, he engaged them in a debate. After merely conversing with the soldiers, they were so convinced by Onkelos' arguments, that they all converted to Judaism.

The Roman emperor sent another troop of soldiers, this time instructing them not to converse with him. They arrested him and started taking him to their prison. On the way, Onkelos told them that he had one thing to tell them. He shared with them a simple parable, and they were all so inspired that they converted to Judaism. The Roman emperor again sent a troop of soldiers, telling them not to converse with him at all.

On the way to the prison, Onkelos touched a *mezuzah* that they passed by⁷. He asked the soldiers if they knew what it was, and they responded, "No". He told them that the way of the world is soldiers are on the outside protecting the King on the inside, but the G-d of Israel rests on the outside of their homes (as his name is in the *mezuzah* of their doorposts), protecting them inside. They were so inspired that they all converted to Judaism. The Roman emperor gave up and Onkelos remained a free man.

We could say something similar about Avraham. He was the first proselytizer, convincing masses of people of the Unity of G-d. He had many followers who converted to his religion, which would one day

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Genesis 12:13

² Genesis loc. cit.

³ Ad. loc.

⁴ Ibid 14:23

⁵ See <http://parshaponders.com/lech-lecha-5778> for more on this episode

⁶ Avodah Zarah 11a

⁷ I recall seeing in a footnote in the Schottenstein Talmud from ArtScroll a suggestion that this could be the source for touching the *mezuzah* and kissing it while passing by it

become Judaism⁸. He must have been an amazing orator and had convincing arguments. What then was Avraham afraid of with going to Egypt? He could have simply convinced them to convert to Judaism, just like Onkelos did with the Romans.

Avraham was afraid that because of Sarah's intense beauty, the Egyptians would have acted rashly. They would have assumed Avraham was her husband, and killed him on the spot. He wouldn't have time to convince them to convert. He therefore came up with a plan. Avraham would present himself as Sarah's brother. As such, the Egyptians would try to persuade Avraham to give Sarah to them as their wife. They would offer him gifts, so that she would go to the highest bidder. While they would be presenting their gifts, this would afford Avraham the opportunity to speak with them. He could present to them his arguments for Monotheism, and convince them convert. This is why he hoped to receive gifts.

Good Shabbos

⁸ See [Genesis 12:5](#) with [Rashi](#)