

Devar Torah for Parashat Lekh Lekha

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Shabbat Shalom! This week's Torah portion, *Lekh Lekha*, talks about Abraham's physical and spiritual journey with Sarah. There are several interesting and useful stories; however, I, like the great poet Robert Frost, will be veering off of that path onto one less traveled. My chosen subject does not take up a huge part of this text, but we must know about it to help us understand the stories. Let me give you a hint: it's a very common animal, it is fluffy, and says "baa". If you haven't already guessed, the animal that I am referring to is none other than the sheep.

To understand America's economy, one must know about automobiles and oil. Both are central parts in the economy as sheep were in ancient Israel. The fact that sheep are even mentioned in the Torah suggests that the topic of sheep is not a trivial matter.

The words *keves* and *kesev* were mentioned in the Torah a combined 121 times not to mention its synonyms. In comparison, Sarah was only mentioned 55 times. There are several different names in Hebrew that mean sheep. A one year old male is a *keves*, a one year old female is a *kavsa*, *kivsa*, or *kisba*. An adult male is an *ayil*, a 3 year old is an *ayil meshullash*, and a mature female is a *rahel*. Both a young sheep and goat is called a *taleh*, and a fully grown sheep is a *se*. A *kesev* according to one source is a strange looking sheep and according to another, a *kesev* was a spotted or speckled animal. I think that *keves* and *kesev* mean the same thing and that this is just a case of metathesis. Metathesis is where two words mean the same thing, but they have letters that are switched around. In old English, the word "ask" was spelled "a-k-s" but then became too

confusing with an axe with which one chops wood. *Tson* was a word used to describe sheep and goats together. The Tanakh only separates goats from sheep once by referring to goats as *izzim*. In the Mishna, it says, "*behema dakka*" meaning small cattle. Hebrew having many words for sheep is not unusual. The Eskimos have many words for snow, we have lots of names for cars, and in Arabic, there are numerous words for camel. Different cultures tend to have multiple words for things that are important to them.

Chapter 12 verse 16 says, "And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, male asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels." Why were the animals listed in that order? The riding animals were listed last. The separation of male and female donkeys reflects the experience of the herders. They did this because a male would become virtually uncontrollable if a female of his species approached. Because of this, females afforded superior convenience and greater ease of handling. The addition of camels was actually anachronistic. Camels did not appear until the 12th century B.C.E. which was several hundred years after the patriarchal period. The sheep could have been listed first because of their value.

Because sheep were central to the economy, people had to learn how to share water sources. When Eliezer was going to find a wife for Jacob, he met Rachel at a well where she was getting water for her sheep. Land was fought over because herdsmen needed more space to graze their animals.

Most wool sweaters weigh about one and a half pounds depending on the size and thickness. The most numerous sheep breed in the U.S. is probably the Rambouillet, which typically will yield around 12 to 15 pounds of wool. After washing the wool, one might have about five to seven pounds left, of which four to five pounds would end up in the yarn for the sweater. For this breed, you can

get three or four sweaters. So, every year, a shepherd could shear a few sheep and provide himself and his wives and/or children with a sweater.

Israel sheep were distinguished by their broad and heavy tails. A male's tail could weigh up to 20 pounds. During the winter, that would be a sheep's storage unit of fat. The contents of one such tail was called "*helev*" or tallow and was considered holy. For a sacrifice, the *helev* was the part of the animal given to God. It was probably a delicacy because of its taste. Not only the tallow was valuable, but the entire sheep.

"Why did Abraham want sheep and not oxen?" Oxen were animals used for working and plowing the fields. Since Abraham was a nomad, he had no use for oxen and cows. Sheep were like a *sukka*—that we build on Sukkot—they could easily be transported at the will of their owner.

Chapter 13 verse 2 says: "Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold." It was not unusual for shepherds and herdsmen in Canaan to have precious metals. During famines, silver and gold were a store of value and a medium of exchange. Animals had the real value because of products made and produced from and by them.

The nature of Abram's wealth was not that he had lots of precious metals. He was rich in sheep. He was not tied down to something he built, but to a living thing. Today, knowledge is considered mobile wealth; we can bring it with us wherever we go. Abram had to learn what to feed his sheep, when to shear them and how they behave. If he hired people to take care of his flock for him, he needed to have managing skills and he essentially built an organized business. If God ever asked him to move again, he could just restart using his past experience.

One might ask, “Why does it even mention that Abraham was wealthy as it does in Gen. 13:2?” The Torah mentions this because it provides a background for the next incident in his life. That was when Lot and Abram’s herdsman got into an argument over the shortage of land. Abram then split the land between himself and his nephew.

Was being wealthy good or bad? The reasoning is the same today as it was then. Wealth was good then because one could afford servants. By having people do all of the work that one would normally do, one could relax and get the luxury called time. Being rich was also good because one could afford better things for one’s house like a fancy chair. Being wealthy also meant security, in that there was less of a chance that one would starve because one had a surplus of food and a storage area. It was also considered a sign of having God’s favor at least if one acquired one’s wealth honestly. Living with great wealth was bad because people—following their human nature—could steal one’s wealth for their own personal benefit.

Abram took his sheep with him because his intent was to never go back. When I went to Phoenix, I did not take my gerbil with me because I was planning on returning. Sheep were not something that you would bring with you wherever you went.

God, at the end of this parasha, promises Abraham to an abundance of children. Why children and not sheep? Abraham never asked for children, he wanted more sheep. To elaborate, I drew up a pros and cons list for each. The pros for having children; they worked the fields and were a pleasure to teach. Cons: you had to take constant care of them, they cry, and they whine. For sheep, the pros were; you get clothing from their wool, milk, meat, shofarot, they breed quite fast, and you can make a Torah scroll from their hide. Additionally, sheep kept fields from overgrowing, one could earn a profit from selling them, and could use them as a

sacrifice. The only con I could think of was that one had to constantly watch over them.

The typical thought about shepherds is that all they did was sit around and watch sheep. On the contrary, being a shepherd was more than that. A shepherd had to keep an eye on what their flock ate and, in case of danger, a shepherd would have to be alert for any wandering young lamb. They would have to catch up with their flock if it suddenly took off. It has been recorded that a ram on a short charge can reach speeds up to 38 miles per hour. Sheep could also be very heavy; a ewe could weigh between 100 and 225 pounds, and a ram could be from 100 to 350 pounds. A shepherd would also need to know how to tell if a sheep was actually injured. If they were transporting their flock, and a sheep was injured, he would have to carry or help along a potentially 350 pound animal.

Even though sheep have peripheral vision reaching 270 to 320 degrees, they have poor depth perception. They prefer to stay in well lit places because otherwise, they would not be able to see dips or bumps in the land. Because of this, a shepherd needed to guide them if they walked into a shady area. If the flock got upset, their shepherd would bring them to safety.

There is a story about King David, Uriah, and his wife Batsheva. God sent the prophet Nathan to David and Nathan said, "There were two men in one city, one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveler unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him." King David became angry at the man and said "As the

Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He shall pay for the lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and showed no pity.” Nathan said, “That man is you!” What Nathan meant was that Batsheva was the lamb because King David had caused the death of her husband. To understand the intensity of Nathan’s statement, one must know that sheep were something that people might have an emotional attachment to.

King David, Moses, Abram, Itzhak, and Yakov were all shepherds. All of them were influential Jewish figures who started their lives out as shepherds. That alone should tell us that shepherding was an important occupation. The relevance of sheep in Jewish civilization is seen in the central image of shepherd and sheep. The very famous psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. God makes me lie down in green pastures, God leads me beside quiet waters, God restores my soul. God guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” To fully appreciate the imagery, we have to understand the relationship between the sheep and shepherd.

Sheep are a vital component to interpreting the stories of the Torah. The importance of understanding how sheep behave is shown in the story of Jacob and Lavan. When Jacob was asking for his wages for working twenty one years, he said that he would simply take out of the flock all of those that were any color other than the traditional white. The sheep began to breed and the offspring were darker as well. In Egypt, the Jews lived in Goshen because they owned sheep. The Egyptians looked down upon shepherds, so they simply separated them out. The fact that Jews were shepherds explains why they were living separately from the Egyptians. It also explains why Egyptians despised them.

All in all, sheep played a very crucial role in ancient times. Fortunately, we still have the wonderful animal today which provides us with clothing, sometimes milk, meat and the opportunity to gawk mindlessly at adorable animals at petting zoos. Sheep were one of the first animal species to be domesticated by mankind. They should not be taken for granted. Understanding how a sheep lives helps us to understand how people lived in ancient times. We know for sure that sheep were important because they were mentioned in the Torah on hundreds of occasions. They were a person's wealth and companionship.

First off, I would like to thank my wonderful, patient sister, Gilah, who sat with me for many hours teaching me the psalms and services that I sang today; and my father and rabbi, [Jon-Jay](#), for helping me write my devar Torah and for enthusiastically correcting my Hebrew accents and pronunciations. I want to thank my loving mother who taught me the haftora portion and trope. Thank you, Tsvi and Noam, for all of your brotherly love. And thank you to all of you here today for sitting through my captivating devar Torah about sheep. Shabbat Shalom!