

No Better Parshas for Election Weeks

Lech Lecha, Vayera and the Covenantal Grammar of Choosing Stewards

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The calendar

There are no better parshas for the week before and the week of critical elections. Shabbat Lech Lecha falls on 24 October 2026 (13 Cheshvan). Three days later, on Tuesday 27 October (16 Cheshvan), Israel elects its 26th Knesset. It is the first Knesset election held on its legally scheduled date since 1988.¹ Shabbat Vayera follows on 31 October, the Shabbat before the US midterm elections on Tuesday 3 November.

These two parshas lay down the Torah's grammar for building a nation: the call to go forth, the making of covenant, the testing of identity against outside powers, moral vision and the argument for justice, and the guarding of the line through which the covenant is passed on. They do not endorse any list or party. They set the floor and the direction for how a free people chooses its stewards.

Lech Lecha: going forth

The parasha opens with the command on which everything after it rests: “Lech lecha mei’artzecha u’mimoladetecha u’mibeit avicha el ha’aretz asher areka” (Bereishit 12:1). Rashi reads “lecha” as “for your benefit and your good.”² Ramban, on the same parasha, sets out the rule that “whatever happened to the fathers is a sign for the children” (ma’aseh avot siman labanim, on 12:6).³ That rule is what allows us to read these chapters against our own week.

Two covenants frame the portion. The Brit Bein HaBetarim (chapter 15) promises land and nation and foretells the long night of exile and the return in the fourth generation. Brit Milah (chapter 17) puts the sign of an everlasting covenant on the body. Avram becomes Avraham and Sarai becomes Sarah, private people becoming founders. Avraham is told “hithalech lefanai,” walk before Me (17:1). Rashi contrasts this with Noach, who walked with G-d and needed support (6:9).⁴

Voting is a small lech lecha. It means leaving the comfort of cynicism and the habit of “nothing changes,” and appearing to be counted. Covenantal republicanism hears the same note. A republic is not a machine for adding up preferences. It is a people that has consented to live under a higher law and renews that consent from time to time by choosing its stewards.

The math of being counted

The covenant asks us to appear and be counted, so it is worth doing the actual counting. In the last election, on 1 November 2022, 4,794,593 of 6,788,804 eligible voters voted, a turnout of 70.63%. Of those ballots, 4,764,742 were valid.⁵ The threshold is 3.25% of valid votes:

$4,764,742 \times 0.0325 = 154,854.1$, so a list needed 154,855 votes to enter the Knesset.

A list that just clears the line wins about $3.25\% \times 120 = 3.9$ seats, which in practice means four. In 2022 two lists fell just short, at 3.16% (150,793 votes) and 2.91% (138,617). Together that was 289,410 votes, about 6.1% of all valid ballots ($289,410 \div 4,764,742$), and they elected no one.⁵ A

majority is 61 of 120 seats, or 50.8%. Under the Bader-Ofer method, surplus-vote agreements between pairs of lists decide where leftover votes go, and they can move a seat.⁶

None of this tells anyone how to vote. It does show that a few thousand people staying home, or casting a vote that is lost below the threshold, can decide a seat, and a seat can decide a majority. These are disciplines of structure, not the covenant itself. They are how a people tries to make its representation able to carry the charge rather than scatter into pieces.

Vayera: seeing, arguing, being tested

“Vayera elav Hashem” (18:1). Avraham sees and is seen. Three strangers arrive, and he runs to them. Chesed here is not sentiment. It is the practical recognition that the stranger at the tent is the test of whether the covenant is alive.

Then comes the plea for Sodom: “Ha’af tispeh tzaddik im rasha? ... Hashofet kol ha’aretz lo ya’aseh mishpat?” Will You sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice? (18:23, 25). Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called this the beginning of “the world’s first religion of protest”: faith that challenges the world as it is in the name of the world as it ought to be.⁷ In an election season the question is not only whether we like the candidates. It is whether we will stand as Avraham stood and insist that power serve justice and not merely the strong.

The Akeidah closes the portion. “Lech lecha el eretz haMoriah” (22:2) echoes the first lech lecha. The covenant is not a contract to renegotiate when the price rises. After the ram, the promise is sealed with an oath (22:16–18). Leadership that has never passed a test of costly fidelity is not yet leadership. And the argument for justice does not end when the ballots are counted.

The full field of forces

These parshas place before us everything a covenantal people faces while it chooses.

Near heirs who cannot carry the covenant. Lot chooses the plain of the Jordan because it was well watered, “like the garden of Hashem, like the land of Egypt” (13:10), and settles near Sodom. Yishmael is blessed and promised a great nation, yet “My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak” (17:21). Neither is cast off without blessing. Neither can be the bearer of the covenant. The lesson for any election is not partisan. It is the discipline of not confusing closeness with fitness.

Outside powers that test identity, twice. The sister-wife episode happens once with Pharaoh (chapter 12) and again with Avimelech (chapter 20). Both times Sarah is taken and returned. The second test, after the milah and after the promise of Yitzchak, shows that surviving the first test does not end the testing. It is followed by a treaty at Be’er Sheva (21:22–32). Peace becomes possible once the outside power has learned that the G-d of Avraham sees and acts. Identity is not negotiable, restitution comes first, and treaties can follow.

War, captives and refusal. In the war of the four kings against the five, Lot is taken captive. Avraham does not ask whether Lot earned rescue. He arms 318 men of his household and pursues (14:14). Then he refuses the king of Sodom’s spoils, “so you shall not say, I made Avram rich” (14:23). The captive is rescued for his own sake and for the sanctification of the Name, not

as a partnership with the place of corruption. Since 7 October 2023, none of this is abstract for us.

The middot. Chesed runs to the stranger. Rachamim bargains for the city from fifty down to ten. Gevurah does not withhold the son. Then comes sober peace once the boundary holds. Leadership in these chapters means moving among the three without confusing them.

Sarah's voice and the guarding of the line

After Yitzchak is weaned, Sarah sees the son of Hagar “metzachek” (21:9). Rashi, from the Midrash, reads the word across its biblical uses (idolatry, immorality, bloodshed), and from her words in 21:10 he reads a quarrel over the inheritance.⁸ Avraham is distressed. G-d answers him: “All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Yitzchak shall your seed be called” (21:12). Yishmael is still blessed: “I will make him a nation, for he is your seed” (21:13). The well is revealed and the cry is heard. Being sent out is not the erasure of blessing. It is removal from the household's inheritance so that the everlasting covenant stays the covenant of Yitzchak.

The tradition does not hide the cost. Ramban holds that Sarah sinned in afflicting Hagar earlier, and Avraham with her for allowing it, and that their descendants paid for it (on 16:6).⁹ That moral weight belongs in any honest reading.

What follows for a modern state? The principle I draw is about stance, not ethnicity. The places that set the direction of a covenantal polity are its security, its definition of its own character and the education of its next generation. They should be held by those who accept the covenant's continuity, not by those whose goal is to contest the inheritance itself. Every citizen keeps his own blessing and his full dignity, as Yishmael kept his. But the steering of the covenant is not decided by closeness alone. Each voter decides for himself whom that principle includes. The parasha supplies the principle. It does not supply a list.

Sarah among the seven prophetesses

The Gemara (Megillah 14a) counts 48 prophets and seven prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Chanah, Avigayil, Chuldah and Esther.¹⁰ It identifies Sarah with Yiskah, “for she saw by ruach hakodesh.” Of the seven, only Miriam (Shemot 15:20), Devorah (Shoftim 4:4) and Chuldah (II Melachim 22:14) are called nevi'ah in the verse itself. Miriam foresaw the birth of the redeemer while she was still “the sister of Aharon,” before Moshe was born. Devorah summoned the tribes. Chanah's prayer became the model for the silent Amidah. Avigayil held David back from bloodshed. When the scroll was found, Yoshiyahu sent to Chuldah rather than to Yirmiyahu, and the Gemara explains it was because women are more compassionate (14b). Esther acted when the Name was hidden.

Each of them appears at a point where leadership needed a second kind of sight in order to carry the people forward. Sarah's comes first, at the root: through Yitzchak shall your seed be called.

The floor and the direction

These parshas do not tell a voter which list to choose. They tell a people what kind of people it must be to remain a covenantal republic rather than a collection of interest groups. Lech Lecha

asks whether we will leave the familiar for the sake of the future. Vayera asks whether we will see clearly, argue for the righteous and pass the tests that come after the choice.

From the furnaces of Pittsburgh to the walls of Yerushalayim, the lesson is the same: history is not only what happens to us. It is what we answer when the call comes. The call on 27 October, and again on 3 November, is the one Avraham heard. Go forth, see, argue for justice, guard the line, and do not hold back the future.

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Sources

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