



***Parshat Lech Lecha***  
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**Beyond the Hashtag**  
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Years ago, when I was living in Israel, I remember going to visit the Tomb of the Patriarchs (Ma'arat haMachpelah) in Hevron. I remember feeling totally overwhelmed by the sheer number of visitors and by all the sounds. There were tourists snapping their cameras and talking loudly about the history of the place and about plans for lunch. There were what felt like hundreds of Orthodox Jewish men praying in blocs, Hebrew prayers racing fluently through their mouths as they turned pages in unison. There were Hassidic Jews swaying and crying out, tears literally streaming down their faces as they poured out their souls to God. There were so many people there, it was hard even to move through the site.

For a while, I edged around each group, determined to at least catch a glimpse of every grave. I was starting to feel claustrophobic when I saw what felt like a miracle. Across the way, there was a room that was largely empty. I raced towards it, sighing with relief. It was only then that I noticed where I stood.

Leah's grave was largely abandoned. I sat down, breathing deeply for the first time since I entered the holy site. I was so grateful for the space. I closed my eyes, emptying my mind to meditate and pray. But as soon as my eyes closed, I had the most profoundly unexpected spiritual experience.

I imagined Leah as a child. Tall for her age, and quiet. Unlike her sister, she was not out meeting people at the well and helping with their livestock. She was home, tending the hearth, dreaming about the man who would one day be her love.

I imagined Leah following her father's instructions, marrying a man she did not know, a man who loved her sister, and who did not love her. I could almost picture Lavan telling Leah not to worry, telling her that love grows in a marriage, promising her that Jacob would grow to love her.

And then, I imagined Leah, a young bride, lonely and isolated. Hated by her husband. Hated by her sister. Perceived as the betrayer; the homewrecker. Despite the cold shoulders and the acrimonious neglect, Leah fulfilled her duties as a wife. She bore seven children. Seven children whom she showered with love and raised the best way she knew how. She maintained her faith. And she did not allow herself to wallow in self-pity. As Jacob went on to marry the love of his life, who happened to be her sister Rachel, and as the two lovebirds nested together, Leah quietly continued doing what was right no matter what.

Leah's path is hard to imagine in today's world. How did Leah find the strength to ignore other people's reactions to her? How did she find the courage to be herself no matter what?

Today, everything is driven by perception. By public approval. We spend our days carefully documenting each meal, each smile, each adventure. We post and tweet and market ourselves, hoping to generate social media validation. We want to be seen for the fun-loving and always glamorous people that we are. We want people to know when we do something nice for someone else. Look, here's the birthday card, the bag of donations, here I am at the Walk for Hunger, look at me I'm standing at an action against injustice.

We are so obsessed with our public perception that we sometimes even put ourselves at risk. The other day, I was reading this wild New York Times article about two young woman who were expelled from their cruise after they dangled precariously from their cabin balcony for

a Titanic-esque selfie. In a parade of absurd tragedy, the article went on to list story after story of near-fatal accidents and demise which took place in the name of social media.

This drive for external validation is emblematic of a much deeper truth. At core, each one of us is hungry for love and connection. Our lives are so busy and so full that we don't have time to stop and schmooze with our neighbors. In the world, we live in such a big city that we're constantly moving amongst strangers, unseen. We want to feel that we are a part of something larger. We want to build a picture of our lives that is wholesome and complete. And we desperately want to be *seen*.

But here's the catch: the more we try to be *seen*, the less we are *able* to see. When we live our lives in pursuit of external validation, our ability to make choices based on our own inner compass, our own moral integrity, is compromised. We start to lose our sense of who we are. We make choices based on our perception of other people's perceptions. And when we are validated for the pictures that we post of ourselves doing activities that are popular, we are validated for being like everyone else, which doesn't feel very validating at all.

We all know people who have fallen victim to this pattern. I see it with young people all the time. Young people who chose a major because it was popular, because their parents wanted it, because they thought it would be cool to post that title on their LinkedIn profile. Years go by and they burn out, because the passion was someone else's. I see it the other way too. Young people who desperately need a job, who need to find a career, but they are so worried about what their title will be on LinkedIn, so worried about what other people will think, that they turn down jobs for fear they will be seen as not successful enough.

It happens with relationships. People fall in love with what other people think, with the boxes their suitors check, with the idea of being in love.

Our obsession with how we are perceived is paralyzing.

It is time for us to turn our attention inward. Time for us to follow the beat of our own drum. Time for us to do what's right no matter who is watching or what they think.

Last week, I had the privilege to attend a celebration of Bruce Donoff's 28-year tenure as Dean of the Harvard Dental School. It was a beautiful evening. So many students and colleagues shared beautiful reflections about Bruce's career and their experiences learning with him. But one story stood out above the rest. Larry Backow shared that a while back, Harvard was supporting a poet who had fled for his life from Uganda. The poet wrote about his experiences being gay in a place where homosexuality is literally a death sentence. And, for his artistic brilliance, he was beaten to such an extent that he lost all his teeth. Larry reached out to Bruce to see if maybe he could help. Bruce, in his typical form, assured Larry that he would take care of it. Larry offered financial support. Bruce thanked him, but said he didn't need any money. The only thing he asked was that Larry not make a big deal about it. Larry shared that he honored Bruce's request until last week. But, at Bruce's celebration, Larry broke his silence. He spoke about Bruce's *menchlichkeit*, Bruce's propensity to do good, not because he wants public accolades, but because he wants to do what is right.

On this Veteran's Day Weekend, we have spiritual homework to do. We honor the men and women who fought for our country, not because they wanted to be seen, but because they saw a higher purpose. We honor the many Leah's who live in our midst. The people like Bruce, who quietly go about making the world a better place, just because. And we ask: is there something I would do, something I could do, if only I could stop worrying about what other people think?