LEKH LEKHA: Negotiating Sara's Dowry

PROBLEMS IN GOD'S LAND

This week's Parasha begins with the story of Abraham, our first patriarch. God blesses Abraham repeatedly, assuring him that numerous peoples and civilizations will come from him and inherit the precious land of Canaan (Israel). But things happen differently than Abraham would have expected. Shortly after arriving in Israel, a tremendous famine hits the region, probably due to a lack of rain. The Midrash says that there was never such a famine in the land of Israel, and Abraham is forced to escape. But he does not return to the north, where he came from. Abraham traveled south to Egypt, which, thanks to the generous Nile, was not affected by droughts.

PROBLEMS IN THE LAND OF THE PHARAOHS

Abraham arrives in Egypt as a refugee escaping from starvation. In Egypt, he is a foreigner who can be easily abused. And besides, he has a very delicate problem. Despite her advanced age, his wife Sara was still a very beautiful woman. And Abraham knows the duplicity of Egyptian morality. For the Egyptians, adultery was forbidden, and marriage was sacred. And not even Pharaoh could take a married woman. But there was no moral or legal problem in taking a widow! Therefore, it was very tempting for any Egyptian to kill Abraham and take his wife. Human life in those times was worth nothing, especially that of a foreigner. Foreseeing all this, and with few other options, Abraham devises a plan: posing Sara as his sister. That way, Abraham when the Egyptians would come to Abraham asking for his "sister's" hand, he would negotiate for months… He would start by demanding an exorbitant dowry for Sara, leading to long negotiations, and in the meantime, Abraham could sell all the merchandise he

brought with him, buy some food, and return to Israel as soon as possible. The plan is perfect!

MURPHY LAWS

But Abraham's plan did not work as he expected. Why? Because Abraham underestimated his wife's beauty. And he never suspected that Pharaoh himself would be interested in Sara! When the king's men saw her, there were no negotiations. Pharaoh's men took Sarah by force, without Abraham's consent, and then showered "her brother Abraham with gifts", probably exceeding any exorbitant sum Abraham expected to be offered as a fake dowry. Abraham is now desperate. God is not communicating with Abraham to tell him what to do, and he could not be sure if Sara's kidnapping was part of a Divine plan to return to Israel and look for another wife to have children or if he had to wait for some type of Divine intervention.

REPARATIONS

Miraculously, and while Sara is still untouched, Pharaoh and his entire court suffered a rare affliction that the monarch correctly interpreted as a sign of Divine punishment. Pharaoh discovers the actual marital status of Sara, and he summons Abraham, rebukes him, and returns Sara to him. Then he expels Abraham from Egypt. Without knowing what had exactly happened in Pharaoh's palace, Abraham is now safe, sound, and ironically "rich". He returned to the land of Canaan with his beloved wife Sara.