



The Reputation Nation • Parshat Lekh Lekha

Warren Buffet famously said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation, and five minutes to ruin it.” Digitally, we can ruin someone’s reputation even faster than that. One negative tweet, Uber rating, restaurant posting, rate my professor rant, or newspaper comment can damage someone’s reputation irrevocably. There are websites today that try to manage or defend reputations to “help professionals develop and promote a truthful and positive online image through proactive reputation management strategies.”

If it were only that easy. Gossip, cancellations, and trash talk doesn’t just disappear, especially in this polarizing climate. Buffet, in his quote above, puts the onus on the person rather than his or her critics. “If you think,” he says, about how quickly your reputation can change, “you’ll do things differently.”

Understanding the importance of a sterling reputation is as old as the first-Jew, Abraham. One of the most astonishing and understudied encounters between Abram, as he was then called, and his neighbors, appears in this week’s Torah reading, *parshat Lekh Lekha*. In chapter 14, Abraham found himself amidst a battle between four kings and five kings when he tried to rescue his nephew Lot. The verses are not easy to follow given the number of leaders involved and the complex geography.

All war brings confusion and collateral damage. As the battle ends, “King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine” and blessed Abram. The Jewish ritual of blessing wine and breaking

bread originates with a foreign king. Abram gave a tenth of what he owned to King Melchizedek, likely as a form of tax or tribute. Then the King of Sodom, another of the warring kings, said to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself.”

When wars are over, it’s time to tally up losses and split rewards. Abram, however, was not willing to take a thing. “Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, ‘It is I who made Abram rich.’” Rashi observes that Abram was confident that God would provide him with wealth, implied in Genesis 12:2. He did not, therefore, want a human being to take the credit.

Abram wanted nothing from these skirmishes. He gave a portion of what he had without taking as much as a shoelace. He did not even take a small and insignificant item. The Talmud (BT *Hullin* 89a) concludes from this that Abram’s descendants would merit two commandments that involve a string or strap: the thread of sky-blue wool worn on ritual fringes and the strap of the phylacteries.

Abram, it seems, wanted to make a statement to those around him about his personal integrity as a leader and about the kind of God he served. Abram attributed his success to God alone. War to him was not about bounty, captives, or exploitation of the vulnerable. It was about mediating unfortunate obstructions to the Divine promise he received. According to the King of Sodom, Abram was within

his right to take what he wanted but gave away his money instead. By not taking the loot of war, Abram was making a positive character deposit in the minds of the leaders who surrounded him. Abram was forgoing short-term gains for the long-term investment that was his reputation. When it comes to our reputations, there are no short-cuts.

Later, in Genesis 34:30, after Dina was taken and violated by Shechem, Jacob chastises his sons Simeon and Levi for creating and implementing a devious plan to punish Shechem's community: "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land..." The Hebrew expression to make one odious, *akhartem oti*, literally means to make me smell bad. A smell is invisible but can leave a highly potent signature of one's presence. The medieval Spanish commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra, explains Jacob's fears: "They will hate me as one loathes something which gives off a horrible odor." While there are many interpretations of Jacob's behavior here, one message Jacob tried to teach his sons is that our reputations matter. Even when others hurt us profoundly, we must always seek higher ground.

Abram's defense of his personal integrity as a leader brings to mind another dramatic Biblical moment. As the prophet Samuel aged and effectively retired from service, he publicly pledged his honesty.

Then Samuel said to all Israel, "I have yielded to you in all you have asked of me and have set a king over you. Henceforth the king will be your leader. As for me, I have grown old and gray—but my sons are still with you—and I have been your leader from my youth to this day. Here I am! Testify against me, in the presence of the LORD and in the presence of His anointed one: Whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded or whom have I robbed? From whom have I taken a bribe to look the other way? I will return it to you." They responded, "You have not defrauded us, and you have not robbed us, and you have taken nothing from anyone." (I Samuel 12:1-4)

One view in the Talmud (BT *Nedarim* 38a) is that Samuel, like Abraham, was wealthy; he did not need to rely upon the bribes and handouts of his flock. But there is something deeper going on in this odd summative speech.

Samuel was a steward of the Israelites from his youngest years. His mother Hannah pledged him to the Temple under the high priest Eli when he was a child. As he aged, he recounted a lifetime of devotion to his people, culminating with a testament about the many storms they weathered together: "Here I am!" Despite it all. Because of it all. I am still here with you. Samuel needed his flock to affirm that after he was gone, his noble reputation would stay intact. If there had been any misunderstanding or misuse of his authority, let it be known now. The people let it be known. Samuel, they responded in unison, took nothing. He was outstanding in character and in trustworthiness.

Reputations are fragile. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks affirms this in *Essays on Ethics*, "When people associate religiosity with integrity, decency, humility, and compassion, God's name is sanctified. When they come to associate it with contempt for others and for the law, the result is a desecration of God's name."

Leaders can control many things. But they cannot control what is said about them. What they can do, as Abraham, Jacob, and Samuel teach us, is protect the reputations they already have. So, too, with us all. We must work hard. Serve. Apologize often. Compensate for error. And, most importantly, assume others have good intent. The fact that someone may not judge us favorably does not mean we should do the same. And, in the worst-case scenario, we must remember that we are not the worst mistake we have ever made. Reputations, our reputations, are built on justice and a thousand small acts of kindness.