ritualwell
TRADITION & INNOVATION

Writing an Engaging Arc Around the Big Questions: Lech Lecha - Go Forward (Take Yourself and Go)

Session One: Ask Big Life Questions — "In Medias Res."

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

"We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers."
~ *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

When seeking clarity or connection, which kind of question animates you the most? Why/when/how/what/where/who/which? (1 minute or less for each person).

Today's Focus

Approx. 1 minute

- Connect with others
- Explore *Lech Lecha* (Go forward, take yourself and go) beginning with the big question arising from a crucible moment
- Use "In Medias Res" to put the reader into the middle of the action

Jewish Wisdom: Guidance for our writing and our life's questions

Approx. 20 minutes

Across genres, writers invite readers on a journey along with their characters, carrying both from here to there—and when successful leaving both changed. The challenge authors face is how to craft that experience in a way that readers' interests are peaked with the tension, drama, and discovery they crave. Authors ask, "How do I keep my reader reading?" In this unit, we'll explore how to structure a dramatic arc that sustains engagement when writing about personal and spiritual journeying.

When our writing is focused on exploring big life questions (e.g. Who am I? Why am I? Where do I belong?), the idea of *Lech Lecha* (לֶךְ־לְךָ) invites us to journey forth, to uncover the answers we seek. Because there are no easy answers or dogma in Jewish thought, *Lech Lecha* invites us to pursue challenging life questions, to wrestle with faith and hope when obstacles arise, and ultimately to make meaning of our quest.

ritualwell
TRADITION & INNOVATION

Lech Lecha (לֶךְ־לְךָ) is a grammatically unique Hebrew phrase that combines a verb and an indirect object—literally "go forth/take yourself and go"—making it rich in both grammatical ambiguity and spiritual interpretation.

Lech Lecha can mean:

- go to yourself, to go inward for self-discovery
- to go with yourself, to take your values wherever you go
- go by yourself, have the courage to stand alone, to be your unique self

To write an engaging tale of uncovering answers to life's questions related to going to, going with, or going by yourself, we can follow a template extrapolated from the timeless telling of our matriarch Sarah's journey. Below is a pivotal moment in her life that sparked her big life question.

In Sarah's senior years, after a lifetime of infertility, she hears the challenging and disorienting promise to be the mother of a child and a great nation. In the story's subtext, extrapolated from the unwritten white spaces, we hear her ask: "How can I possibly fulfill my purpose?"

Genesis 18:12

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי בְלֹתִי הָיְתָה־לִּי עֶדְנָה וַאדֹנִי זָקֵן׃

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I've lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?"

Sarah's quest to pursue her purpose is captured in the following song ***L'Chi Lach***. It is based on the Biblical text *Lech Lecha* instructing Abraham to go forward to an unknown land (Genesis 12: 1). *L'Chi Lach* puts a twist on the original text by using the feminine form for go forth, inviting Sarah and all women in their senior years to go forward/take yourself and go.

Debbie Friedman, (1951-2011) wrote ***L'Chi Lach*** in partnership with feminist scholar Savina Teubel (1926-2005) for a ceremony they were creating, *Simchat Chochmah,* to honor senior women's journey of continued self-discovery. Teubel said it was to celebrate "the beginning of the last phase of my life." You can find the song on youtube.

ritualwell
TRADITION & INNOVATION

L'Chi Lach (go forward/take yourself and go) by Debbie Friedman

L'chi lach to a land that I will show you
Leich l'cha, to a place you do not know
L'chi lach, on your journey I will bless you
And you shall be a blessing (x3)
l'chi lach

L'chi lach, and I shall make your name great
Leich l'cha, and all shall praise your name
L'chi lach, to the place that I will show you
l'chi lach

L'sim-chat cha-yim (x3) (for the joy of life, go forward)
l'chi lach

(first verse repeats twice more)

Questions for Hevruta (study partner) or done in a large group:

1. A call to go forward/to take yourself and go can begin from an internal or external voice. What is the source of the call in the song? What difference might it make if the source is an internal or external voice?
2. The authors are celebrating the journey of senior women. What big life questions might women (and people of all genders) ask as they pause to celebrate their final chapters?
3. Reaching a pivotal life moment, like reaching the age of 65, can spark big life questions. Think back to your answer in the opening ritual. What kinds of events or experiences might get you asking: who/ what/ where/ when/ why/ which/ how?

ritualwell
TRADITION & INNOVATION

Writer to Writer: Wisdom of Seasoned Jewish Writers

Approx. 10 minutes

Review this quote about the writing tool *in medias res*, to begin in the middle. What stands out for you?

> **Always start from the middle.** Many times, when I write a story, I make up the story as I write it. For example, two people are sitting in a busy train station. One says to the other, "I know you stole that money." So now when I tell the story I don't have to write about the train. Why would people keep reading? Here are two kinds of incentives for people to stay with the story: They want to know what will happen. Is he going to admit he stole the money? (interest in the future) ; and They want to understand what happened before? (interest in the past). When you jump in the middle of the story without people really knowing what is going on, you capture them. You are saying "here is the heart of it, come with me along and I'll explain." You can share what happened in the beginning, if it is important, you can find a way to later.
>
> **~ Etgar Keret, Etgar Keret's 10 Rules of Writing**

In medias res, is a Latin term meaning "in the middle of things" used to describe a narrative technique to begin in the middle of an action rather than at the chronological start. By beginning with a crucible moment of uncertainty or major life change (such as relationship, health, career), you can spark a big life question that allows you to generate immediate tension and urgency. In medias res immediately draws your reader into the world you are creating.

Consider:

- Identifying a dramatic moment of uncertainty, major life challenges, mystery, or curiosity.
- Beginning writing in the middle--when the dramatic pivotal moment begins
- Articulating the spiritual or existential question sparked by the crucible experience

Writing Prompts

Approx. 20 minutes

Apply the prompt to a new piece of writing or something in progress. Be playful and open to whatever may appear on the page.

Write about a challenging and pivotal moment. Get right into the action by beginning in the middle. Give voice to the driving question(s) arising from that experience.

Need help getting started?

1. Select a character who is on a spiritual or personal quest. Consider your own experience (personal reflection) or the experience of someone you know (memoir). Or you could consider a fictional character. (short story/poem)
2. Identify a crucible moment (e.g. a major life event like change in health, relationship, career) that challenges that person in a way that gives rise to a big life question (e.g. Who am I? What is most important? What do I believe?)
3. Think of that crucible moment as an event that requires one to *Lech Lecha* – "go to yourself, to go inward for self-discovery; to go with yourself, to take your values wherever you go; and to go by yourself."

JWC Writer to Writer: learning from your colleagues

Approx. 20 minutes

Invite writers to share from their work and to listen. This could be with a partner or with a larger group. (5 minutes each writer)

- Warm feedback (something you appreciate in the writing–an image, sound, word choice, etc.)
- Something that you're curious about (something that might help in a next edit)

ritualwell
TRADITION & INNOVATION

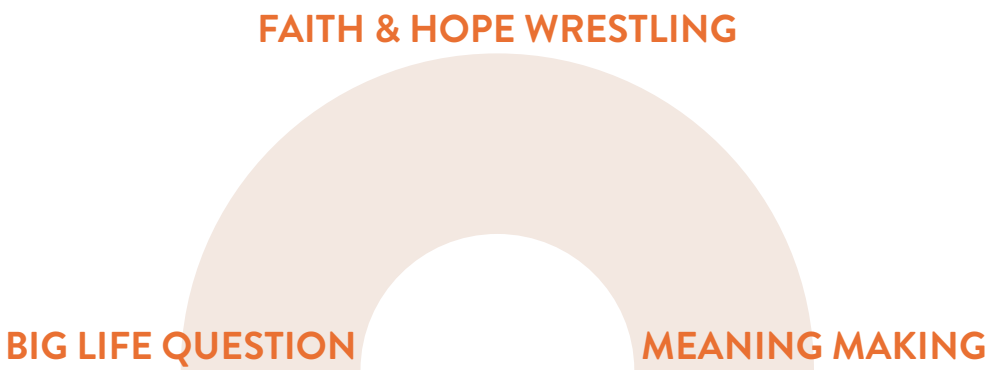
Next steps & Closing Ritual

Approx. 10 minutes

Today we explored *Lech Lecha* (go forward, take yourself and go) with a focus on framing big life questions that arise from dramatic crucible moments. An engaging arc of personal journeying begins with the question. As a closing ritual, we invite you to share with your circle:

- What are you taking home with you? (emotions, needs, questions, or writing ideas)
- You may wish to continue working on the draft you generated today and bring it next time as we continue to explore *Lech Lecha* and the craft of writing an engaging arc around life's big questions.

Three Steps for Writing an Engaging Arc:



Next: Session Two: Faith/Hope Wrestling | Relatable Anecdotes