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

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

Opening Ritual: Welcome and Connections

Approx. 10 minutes

What is something you have faith in? Why? (1 minute or less per participant)

Today's Focus

Approx. 1 minute

- Connect with others
- Explore *Lech Lecha* (Go forward, take yourself and go) with emphasis on faith and hope wrestling when facing obstacles
- Writing a relatable anecdote

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 that authors face is how to craft that experience in a way that peaks readers' interests 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 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) to go forward, to take yourself and go, invites us to pursue challenging life questions, to wrestle with faith and hope when obstacles arise, and ultimately to make meaning of our quest.

To write an engaging tale of uncovering answers to life's big questions, we can follow a template extrapolated from the timeless telling of our matriarch Sarah's journey. In her senior years, after a lifetime of infertility, Sarah hears the challenging and disorienting call to be both the mother of a child, and a great nation.

In the story's subtext, extrapolated from the unwritten white spaces in the text, we can hear her ask the big life question: "How can I possibly fulfill my purpose?"

Repeatedly, as Sarah seeks the answer to her question, she encounters disappointment. Events—including reaching her 90th birthday—indicate that she will NOT fulfill her purpose. Yet, she perseveres, doing what's in her power (e.g. offering her maidservant Hagar to Abraham to have a child) while struggling to keep faith and hope alive. Sarah, according to the text, stopped having her periods and yet is promised that she will have a child. Our matriarch responds to this promise in a truly human and relatable way: with disbelief. She then lies about her initial response (Genesis 18:13-15).

Sarah's struggle to have faith in the face of overwhelming obstacles is captured in the following poem written by Itzik Manger (1901-1969), one of the great Yiddish poets and playwriters of the 20th century. Manger rewrote many Biblical stories using a modern lens, often placing Biblical characters in an Eastern European setting. "Abraham and Sarah," focuses on an anecdote set in a modern context that reveals Sarah's humanity, her doubt and hope. Read the poem below. You'll notice that Manger used the auspicious number "eighteenth" as an exaggeration, showing how Sarah has hoped, waited, and experienced the cycle of disappointment around her ability to conceive for so many years.

Abraham and Sarah | Itzik Manger

"Abie, when will we have child?
We're both already old folks
Everyone knows a woman old as I
has been due for the eighteenth time."

Abraham Our Father smiles and is mute
and puffs away smoking his pipe:
"Have faith my wife, if He on High wills
then even a broom can shoot."

"Abie, Listen up, every night
I hear how my body sobs
And Hagar is still only your maid
And I am your only true wife.

Often, I think that the star in the window
is really the soul of our child,
that wanders around every night
among rain and shadows and wind"

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Our father Abraham smiles and is mute
and puffs away smoking his pipe
"Have Faith my wife. If He on High wills
then even a broom can shoot."

Sometimes when I see how Hagar's child
plays with the sun in the sand,
and I give him a pat on his little head,
a strange sadness comes into my hand.

And when I take him to me on my lap
and he smiles so cleverly and good,
my eyes grow damp and large
and a strange sadness comes into my blood.

Abie, when will we have a child?
We're both already old folks.
Everyone knows a woman old as I
could be due for the eighteenth time."

Abraham Our Father smiles and is mute
and puffs away smoking his pipe:
"Have faith my wife, if He on High wills,
than even a broom can shoot."

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

1. How does Manger humanize/make relatable Sarah and Abraham? What works/doesn't work in making the anecdote engaging?
2. Manger puts a Yiddish proverb in Abraham's mouth "if God wills it, even a broomstick can shoot," meaning that even highly improbable events can occur. What commentary does it offer about Sarah and Abraham's faith? How might Abraham have been more supportive of Sarah as she wrestled with her faith/hope?
3. Reflect on your answer in the opening about one thing you have faith in. To what degree is faith/hope a constant? What can help keep hope/faith in discouraging moments?

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Writer to Writer: Wisdom of Seasoned Jewish Writers

Approx. 10 minutes

Review the quote below about how to write about a time when you/or a character wrestle with faith and hope when meeting an obstacle in pursuit of a big life question. What stands out for you?

> When you write about a particular moment, think about what was special about that moment. Keep pushing the "why" of what is important. And then ask why again. Not just that something made you want to sing—ask, why did it make you want to sing? Write about the small, personal moment even when you are trying to say something big. The small is where the gold is.
>
> Get to the flash points of something that sits with you, that you remember. If you can, lean into a counter-intuitive moment, like something that was shattering, but there was also joy to be found in it.
>
> Watch that you don't use the same words that are overused. You may want to describe being broken-hearted, but those words are said over and over. You need to find new words to help people get in touch with what they are feeling. Use a thesaurus.

Abigail Poegrebin, award-winning journalist and novelist

Consider:

- Digging deep: why does the moment matter?
- Elevating counter-intuitive experiences: find joy in something broken.
- Expanding language: find words that paint a relatable and vivid picture.

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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.

In this unit we've been exploring how to write an engaging arc that begins with asking a big life question.

In today's exercise, you'll heighten reader engagement by writing about one small moment when a person (fictional or real) wrestles with faith and hope when they face an obstacle in their pursuit of a big life question.

Need help to get started?

1. Keeping in mind your character's quest, identify a significant barrier. Write about what happens to faith and hope in one small moment when encountering a hurdle along one's spiritual or personal journey. Is faith strengthened? Is hope challenged? Be open to unlikely combinations arising (e.g. joy and shattering).
2. To make sure your anecdote is relatable, foster empathy by revealing vulnerability and flaws (even our matriarch Sarah expressed doubts and shame). Use language that brings your reader close (e.g. a sinking feeling vs. couldn't even sip my coffee).
3. Build tension by keeping your reader unsure, at least for a while, about what they might discover.

Over the next session, consider making this the focal point of your creative work. We'll be deepening the exploration of creating a dramatic arc.

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)

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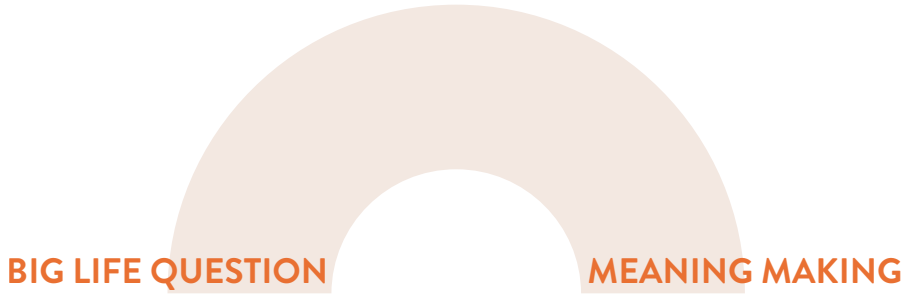
Next steps & Closing Ritual

Approx. 10 minutes

Today we explored *Lech Lecha* (go forward, take yourself and go) with a focus on highlighting relatable vulnerable faith/hope wrestling anecdotes. By fostering readers' empathy and keeping the outcome unpredictable, you can sustain readers' interest. 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. In the coming weeks, we will explore the role of meaning making in writing an engaging arc around big life questions.

Three Steps for Writing an Engaging Arc:



Next: Session Three:| Meaning Making. Perspective Shift