

The Reputation Nation • Parshat Lekh Lekha

Warren Buffett 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. Buffett, 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 will not be confident

