**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Lekh-Lekha introduces us to the mysterious figure of Malki Tzedek, the king of Shalem, who is described as being “a priest to the Supreme God” and who greeted Avraham and his men with food and drink upon their return from battle (14:18).

Rashi, based on several sources (including *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, and Nedarim 32b), identifies Malki Tzedek as Noach’s son, Shem. The city of Shalem, over which Malki Tzedek ruled, is identified by the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:10) as the city which would later be called Jerusalem. The Midrash tells that Shem gave the city the name “Shalem,” whereas later, after the incident of *akeidat Yitzchak* (22:14), Avraham named this area “Yireh.” God was concerned that if He named the city Shalem, then Avraham would object, whereas if He named the city Yireh, then Shem would protest. He therefore named the city “Yerushalayim,” a combination of the names “Yireh” and “Shalem,” thus fulfilling the wishes of both these righteous figures.

To explain the significance of these two different names, the *Meshekh Chokhma* (Bereishit 22:14) writes that they correspond to the two basic categories of obligations that we bear – our responsibilities to our fellowmen, and our responsibilities to our Creator. The name “Shalem,” which is associated with the word “*shalom*,” alludes to peaceful relations among people. The *Meshekh Chokhma* suggests that having survived the generation of the flood, which was characterized by violence and theft, Shem set out to build a humane, moral society, and thus named his city “Shalem.” Avraham’s primary point of focus, meanwhile, was the dissemination of monotheistic belief, bringing the people of his time to an awareness of the existence of a single Creator. And thus at the moment of his greatest display of unconditional devotion to God, when he was prepared to sacrifice his own son in fulfillment of the divine will, Avraham named the city “Yireh,” a reference to both the concept of fear of God (“*yir’a*”) and the notion of God’s Providence and watchful eye (the full name Avraham gave Moriah was “*Hashem yir’eh*” – “God shall watch”).

Accordingly, the Midrash’s depiction of God’s concern to accommodate both Shem and Avraham’s wishes illustrates the danger of defining Judaism as either “Shalem” or “Yireh,” rather than as a combination of both. It might seem initially that if we view “Jerusalem,” the core essence of Judaism, as “Shalem,” as requiring sensitivity, integrity and kindness in our interpersonal affairs, then we necessarily compromise the element of “Yireh,” our ritual and spiritual obligations. Conversely, one could think, if we see the Torah as focused mainly on “Yireh,” on our obligations to God, then we *ipso facto* undermine the importance of “Shalem,” of proper interpersonal conduct. The Midrash here teaches that the core essence of Judaism is “Yerushalayim,” the combination of “Yireh” and “Shalem.” We must focus our attention on both our obligations to the Almighty and our obligations to other people, as it is through the combination of both realms that we achieve the goal represented by “Yerushalayim,” the eternal symbol of the type of sanctity which the Torah demands that we aspire to achieve throughout our lives.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the battle Avraham waged to rescue the people and property of Sedom from the four kingdoms that had taken the townspeople captive and seized their possessions. Upon Avraham’s triumphant return from battle, he was met by the king of Sedom, who offered to allow Avraham to keep all the property he had retrieved. Avraham refused, vowing that he would not accept even a “thread or a shoe strap” from the rescued possessions (14:23). The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (89a) comments that in reward for Avraham’s refusal to accept these materials, his descendants received the *mitzva* of the *tzitzit* strings – corresponding to Avraham’s refusal to accept a “thread” – and the *mitzva* of the *tefillin* straps – corresponding to the refusal to accept a “shoe strap.”

What might be the connection between these two *mitzvot* and Avraham’s vow to the king of Sedom? Why did *Chazal* associate the *mitzvot* of *tzitzit* and *tefillin* with this episode?

The stated reason for both these *mitzvot* is that they serve to remind us of our religious obligations. In Sefer Shemot (13:9), the Torah requires wearing *tefillin* “in order that the law of the Lord shall be in your mouth.” Wearing *tefillin* – which contains portions of the Torah – on our arms and heads reminds us to be cognizant at all times of the Torah, thus helping to ensure that we regularly speak of Torah matters. Likewise, the Torah in Sefer Bamidbar (15:40) commands us to affix *tzitzit* strings to our garment “in order that you remember to perform all of My commands.” The strings serve as a reminder of God’s laws, helping us to avoid neglecting our obligations. As people are naturally inclined to be lured away from the Torah’s laws, we are to wear these signs as reminders of our religious responsibilities.

By associating these *mitzvot* with Avraham’s vow to the king of Sedom, *Chazal* perhaps seek to teach us that wearing *tefillin* and *tzitzit* alone does not suffice to remind us of our religious obligations. Ultimately, our fealty to God’s laws depends upon our attitude and mindset. No thread or strap in the world will protect us against distractions and lures unless we live with the priority scale expressed by Avraham in response to the king of Sedom’s offer. Leaving aside the question raised by many as to why exactly Avraham chose to decline the offer, Avraham’s refusal – and the vehemence with which he announced it – demonstrates that he did not view material profit as a high priority. Avraham was a very wealthy man, but his life did not revolve around the accumulation of wealth. He spent his life not in the constant pursuit of material assets, but rather in the pursuit of the fulfillment of God’s will, working to disseminate the belief in a Creator. And it is only when we live this way, putting the service of God ahead of our material pursuits, that we can remain focused on our religious responsibilities. *Tefillin* and *tzitzit* will not impact somebody whose life revolves around the pursuit of material comforts and luxury. It is only if we are spiritually attuned, genuinely devoting our life to the service of God, and setting this goal as our highest priority, that these *mitzvot* can have the desired effect of reminding us of this lifelong ambition, which ought to be our primary point of focus throughout our lives.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of the war Avraham waged against the four kingdoms that had captured Sedom and its surrounding cities, seized the cities’ property and took their people captive. A refugee escaping the war informed Avraham that his nephew, Lot, who had been living in Sedom, was captured, and Avraham immediately mobilized a small army and set out to rescue the captives. The Torah (14:15) tells, “*Va-yeichaleik aleihem layla*” – “the night split for them,” meaning, Avraham and his troops launched their attack in the middle of the night.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:3) draws a connection between Avraham’s midnight attack against the four kingdoms and the plague of the firstborn which God visited upon Egypt at midnight: “The Almighty said: Their forefather acted on My behalf at midnight; I, too, will act on his descendants’ behalf at midnight…in Egypt.” How might we explain this association? What connection is there between Avraham’s battle to rescue his nephew and the Exodus from Egypt?

Although Avraham was a wealthy, prominent and well-respected figure, he personally led his men to battle against the four kings. He didn’t just send an army to rescue Lot and his fellow townspeople; he led an army to rescue them. Likewise, as we emphasize in the *Haggadah* on Pesach night, God directly rescued *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt. He intervened openly, by performing supernatural miracles, rather than free the people through the ordinary mediums of the natural order. The Midrash here draws our attention to the fact that just as God descends from His lofty position in the heavens to assist the downtrodden, similarly, Avraham did not allow his position of prominence to prevent him from personally involving himself in the effort to rescue the captives of Sedom.

An additional point of resemblance, perhaps, is that God rescued *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt despite their being unworthy of redemption, just as Avraham rescued the people of Sedom despite their sinfulness. The prophet Yechezkel (20) speaks of how God redeemed *Benei Yisrael* from Egyptian bondage despite their having been entrenched in pagan worship. And the Torah here in Parashat Lekh-Lekha (13:13), amidst the account of Lot’s decision to settle in Sedom, emphasizes that the people of Sedom were sinful. In both instances, the people in distress were not necessarily worthy of being helped, but were nevertheless freed from the oppression they had been enduring.

Thus, the Midrash here teaches us that we are to lend assistance to those in need despite their standing or stature. Avraham followed the example set by God, who bestows kindness upon His creatures even if they are strictly undeserving, and so he set out to rescue the people of Sedom from captivity despite their sinfulness. We, too, are bidden to dispense kindness and help people in need even if we have reason to question their worthiness, following the model of kindness and compassion set by the Almighty Himself, who provides and cares for us even when we are unworthy of His beneficence.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Malki Tzedek, who is identified as the king of a Shalem and a “priest” who greeted Avraham with food and wine upon his triumphant return from battle (14:18-19). Malki Tzedek praised Avraham, proclaiming, “Blessed is Avram to the Supreme God, who owns heaven and earth.”

Numerous writers sought to explain why Malki Tzedek chose to describe God specifically as the one “who owns heaven and earth” in this context. Why did he refer to the Almighty this way in his congratulatory blessing to Avraham?

Rav Moshe Walner, in *Derushim Le-cheftzeihem*, suggests that this description speaks of the ideal of combining “heaven” and “earth,” of merging the physical and spiritual realms. Just as God resides in the heavens but is directly involved in all worldly affairs, down to the minutest details, similarly, we are to strive to combine the “heavens” – the realm of spirituality – with “earth” – our mundane, worldly affairs. The Torah here describes Malki Tzedek as “*kohein le-Kel Elyon*” (“a priest to the Supreme God”), a term which perhaps suggests a spiritual quality that keeps a person withdrawn and apart from ordinary, worldly matters. When Avraham returned from a successful military campaign, Malki Tzedek marveled at Avraham’s ability to combine the spiritual and worldly realms, to live a life of lofty ideals which are practically applied to mundane pursuits. This ability was highlighted when Avraham waged a successful war. Despite being a renowned spiritual leader, Avraham took up arms and went out to battle when this was necessary to rescue innocent captives. He understood that spirituality demands not disengagement from the world’s problems, but rather active involvement and efforts to help solve them. Malki Tzedek humbly acknowledged that whereas his own life of spirituality was withdrawn from worldly affairs, Avraham succeeded in achieving spiritual excellence by applying his spiritual ideals to solving real-world problems. Avraham’s spirituality was not a life of seclusion in a protective environment of sanctity, but rather a life of intensive engagement in world affairs, working to bring holiness to those affairs, rather than to hide from them.

And thus Avraham was declared to be “blessed to the Supreme God, who owns heaven and earth.” Avraham embodied the ideal of “*konei shamayim va-aretz*,” the model set by God Himself of merging the heavenly and earthly realms. He teaches us that spirituality is to be applied to, and not kept away from, the “real world,” and is specifically intended to enhance our worldly affairs, not to isolate us from it.

Wednesday

Parashat Lekh-Lekha begins with God’s famous command to Avraham, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home, to the land which I will show you” (12:1).

Rav Moshe of Kozhnitz (*Da’at Moshe*) cites Rav Elazar of Lizhensk as finding within this command an allusion to the need for hard work and proactive effort in the pursuit of religious greatness. People might mistakenly assume that they do not need to work hard to achieve, for one of several reasons. They might figure that since they were raised, and now reside, in a “land” – an environment – that is conducive to growth and achievement, they can simply “ride the waves” of their surroundings without exerting much effort and investing hard work. Some people might look to their “birthplace,” their natural strengths and talents, as a source of assurance that they can achieve without the exertion of effort. And then there are those who are overconfident in their “father’s home,” their pedigree and family background. These cases all involve people who feel that have some natural advantage that absolves them of the need to work hard in the pursuit of excellence. They erroneously allow themselves the luxury of passivity and lethargy in their *avodat Hashem*, thinking that they can maintain satisfactory standards the way they are, without having to put in work or effort. The command of “*lekh lekha*,” Rav Elazar of Lizhensk proposed, is a call to all of us, bidding us to disregard all the excuses we are inclined to make for laziness, all the reasons we give ourselves for why we can approach religious observance in a lax, casual manner. We must “go forth,” actively working and striving to grow and achieve.

The first command to Avraham, essentially constituting the first command to the Jewish People, was to “go forth” and journey from our current location and standing. Just as Avraham could not realize his destiny in his homeland, we, too, cannot realize our full potential in our “homeland,” in our comfort zone, and must have the courage and determination to “go forth” and extend beyond our familiar selves to aspire to more ambitious goals.

Thursday

We read towards the beginning of Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham’s experiences after arriving in Canaan, how drought conditions forced him to leave Canaan and temporarily reside in Egypt. There he became very wealthy as a result of the gifts showered upon him by Pharaoh, and he returned to Canaan a very rich man.

The Torah relates that as Avraham traveled from Egypt back to Canaan, “*Va-yeilekh le-masa’av*” – literally, “He went along his journeys” (13:3). Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains this to mean that upon his return to Canaan, Avraham repaid all his debts. Apparently, the drought had caused grave economic hardship in Canaan, forcing Avraham to take loans or purchase food on credit. Now, after he had amassed a large fortune, Avraham made a point of repaying all his creditors.

A number of writers addressed the question of why the Midrash would find it necessary to inform us that Avraham repaid his debts. Why is this worthy of mention? Would we have suspected Avraham of refusing to repay his creditors once he obtained the financial means to do so?

Rav Yitzchak Shlomo Elbaum, in his *Avnei Shai*, suggests that the Midrash seeks to draw our attention to the fact that people trusted Avraham and lent him money. They readily offered him loans, fully confident that he would someday repay them and they would not lose the money. This marked a fulfillment of God’s promise to Avraham when He commanded him to relocate in Canaan, “*va-agadela shemekha*” – that he would earn widespread recognition. The fact that Avraham was able to find lenders who trusted him when he needed help testified to the fulfillment of this promise, that he earned a reputation among the people of Canaan for his honesty and reliability. What is noteworthy, then, is not that Avraham repaid his loans, but that people had granted him loans confidently knowing that he could be trusted.

According to tradition, Avraham devoted his life to the effort to disseminate the belief in one God, courageously opposing the pagan beliefs that prevailed. The Midrash’s brief remark about Avraham paying his creditors reminds us that such efforts cannot succeed without earning people’s trust and a reputation for ethical behavior. The very first condition that must be met if we wish to represent God in the world, and if we wish to influence and inspire people with faith, is being honest and trustworthy, being the kind of person upon whom people confidently feel they can rely without any hesitation.

Friday

Yesterday, we saw the comment of the Midrash, cited by Rashi (Bereishit 13:3), that when Avraham returned to Canaan after his sojourn in Egypt, he ensured to repay his creditors. Avraham had left Canaan to escape the severe drought conditions that struck the area, and evidently was forced to take loans due to the financial hardships he experienced during this period of shortage. Over the course of his stay in Egypt, he became very wealthy, having been showered with gifts by Pharaoh. And so upon his return to Canaan, Avraham was able to repay all the loans he was forced to take during his period of hardship. As we saw, a number of writers raised the question of why the Midrash would find it noteworthy that Avraham repaid his debt upon obtaining the means to do so.

Some suggested interpreting the Midrash’s comments allegorically, as referring not to the repayment of loans, but to other forms of “debt” which Avraham felt he owed. The *Chatam Sofer* explained that when Avraham found himself mired in poverty soon after relocating in Canaan in fulfillment of God’s command, his faith came under challenge by the people around him. Why, they asked, would God command him to move to Canaan, promising him wealth and prestige in his new land, and then subject him to severe drought conditions, to the point where he needed to go elsewhere to sustain himself? Avraham “owed” these challengers an answer, and when he returned to Canaan with wealth, he “repaid” this “loan” by showing them that indeed, God’s promises were fulfilled in full.

Others offer a different allegorical reading of Rashi’s comments, suggesting that it refers to Avraham’s “debt” to the Almighty. God helped Avraham rise from a state of deprivation to a condition of remarkable wealth, and miraculously rescued his wife after she had been abducted. Avraham understood that the extraordinary events he experienced, and God’s assistance during his time of hardship, resulted in a “debt” which he now had to repay. Having been saved by God’s kindness, Avraham now felt obligated to redouble his efforts to work towards disseminating monotheistic belief and inspiring people to live morally and ethically. After surviving a turbulent period of poverty, relocation in a hostile environment, and his wife’s abduction, Avraham set out to repay his “debt,” to work even harder to publicize the Name of God and try to guide his contemporaries to live the life that God wants us to live.

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