**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Midrash, in a famous passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 39:1), describes Avraham’s logically deducing the existence of a Creator, drawing an analogy to a traveler who happens to see a large palace ablaze. Beholding the sight, the person asks, “Is it possible that this palace has no owner?” A burning building with nobody working to douse the flames would appear to be abandoned and ownerless, but it would seem inconceivable that such a large, magnificent structure would not have any owner. Finally, a nearby voice shouts, “I am the owner,” confirming that indeed, there is somebody who owns this building. Similarly, the Midrash relates, Avraham looked at the world and said, “Is it possible that this palace has no owner?” Despite the many “fires” that burn here in our world, the many problems, crises, tragedies, wars and ills that plague humanity, and which led many to believe that the world has no “owner,” Avraham insisted that there must be a Creator who governs the earth. Finally, God – like the palace’s owner in the analogy – spoke to Avraham and affirmed that indeed, the world has an “owner.”

Among the many different insights offered into this analogy is an interpretation suggested by Rav Avraham of Slonim, in his *Beit Avraham*. He detects within the burning palace analogy an observation about not just the state of the world, but also the state of every human being. Within each one of us is a “fire” that causes a great deal of damage and threatens to entirely consume us. Our vices, negative qualities, bad habits and sinful passions resemble a raging fire that hinder our efforts to live the lives we are supposed to live and be the people we are supposed to be. The question posed by the wayfarer about the burning building might also be asked about ourselves: is there an owner? Is it possible to take control of our beings and extinguish the “fire” within us? With so many flaws, powerful and unpredictable emotions, and negative tendencies, are we capable of overcoming our vices and conducting ourselves the way we should? The Midrash teaches us that indeed, the “burning palace” – the human soul – has an owner who fully controls it. We are, in fact, capable of protecting our beings and dousing the “flames” within us, and we must therefore never allow ourselves the convenience of despair, and must instead put in the work necessary to battle the “flames” and be the people we are meant to be.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of the battle Avraham successfully led against the four kingdoms that had invaded the region of Sedom and seized all the cities’ property and taking their residents captive. Avraham rescued Sedom and its neighboring cities, and after the battle, the city’s king made Avraham an offer: “Give me the people, and take for yourself the property” (14:21). In other words, the king of Sedom offered Avraham all the city’s wealth, as long as the people were returned. Avraham then made a solemn oath proclaiming that he would not take anything from Sedom: “From a thread to a shoe-strap – I will not take anything that belongs to you” (14:23).

Numerous commentators raised the question of how to explain the expression, “*mi-chut ve-ad serokh na’al*” – “from a thread to a shoestring.” Generally, this construction (“from…to…”) is used in reference to a broad range, to a spectrum that runs from one extreme to the distant opposite extreme. Here, however, Avraham mentions two items which are quite similar – small, inexpensive possessions. The question thus becomes how to explain this proclamation that Avraham made avowing his refusal to taking anything “from a thread to a shoe-strap.”

Chizkuni, clearly sensitive to this question, offers two possibilities. First, he suggests that the word “*chut*” (“thread”) refers specifically to something which was worn on the head, such that the phrase “*mi-chut ve-ad serokh na’al*” speaks of garments and jewelry worn anywhere on the body, from head to toe. Chizkuni’s second suggestion (which is offered also by Ibn Ezra) is that Avraham mentioned the word “*chut*” to refer to the threading of an entire garment, which is, indeed, something very substantial. Thus, the expression, “*mi-chut ve-ad serokh na’al*” in fact speaks of a wide range – from the threading of a complete garment to the small strap used for a shoe.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, commenting to this verse, advances a creative theory which undermines the entire basis of the question. He writes:

In the Jewish way of looking at things, if one wishes to designate something as all-embracing, one does not take something great and small, or something near and far, and say: from this smallest to the greatest, from this nearest point to that farthest one, but one looks at the word as a circle, takes two objects close to each other and says: from this one right round the world to this other next to it.

Meaning, from the Torah’s perspective, things are arranged not linearly, but circularly, and thus one refers to the full range by mentioning two adjacent items, in between which lies the entire spectrum. Rav Hirsch draws proof to his theory from Moshe’s proclamation to *Benei Yisrael* towards the end of his life that they were all standing at that moment before God, “from your woodcutter to your water-drawer” (Devarim 29:10). There, too, Moshe appears to speak of the nation’s socioeconomic spectrum by mentioning two groups of people which were, presumably, very close to one another on that spectrum.

A different approach emerges from Malbim’s commentary to this verse, where he explains that Avraham refused to take any of the possessions retrieved from the conquering kingdoms because he recognized that it was God who defeated them. It was customary in ancient times for the leader of the triumphant army to seize the spoils, which is why Sedom’s king naturally assumed that Avraham should receive the property that he rescued. However, Avraham’s victory was supernatural, clearly wrought by the Almighty, and thus he felt he had no claim to any of the spoils. Avraham emphasized that he would not take for himself even the smallest items – such as a thread or shoelace – because he humbly saw himself as having played no role whatsoever in the victory. The point he was making is that he did not even do enough to deserve a minuscule share, such as a thread or shoestring, of the spoils. According to this interpretation, Avraham does not speak here of a spectrum, of a range of possessions from largest to smallest, but rather emphasizes that he did not deserve even the smallest possessions.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted the difficulty addressed by several commentators in explaining Avraham’s declaration refusing to accept any of the possessions of Sedom which he had rescued from the city’s conquerors. In response to the king’s offer of all the city’s possessions, Avraham announced, “From a thread to a shoe-strap – I will not take anything that belongs to you” (14:23). As we saw, the commentators raised the question of how to explain the phrase “from a thread to a shoe-strap,” which is formulated as a reference to a wide spectrum spanning one extreme to the other, but mentions two items which are, in fact, very similar to one another.

One creative explanation that has been offered is that Avraham announced his refusal to take something from Sedom on even a temporary basis. The difference between a thread and a shoestring is that a thread is woven into a garment permanently, intended to remain part of the garment as long as the garment exists. A shoelace, by contrast, is used only when fastening the shoe to one’s foot, and then removed. It has been suggested, then, that in this proclamation Avraham was expressing his refusal to take from Sedom not only a “thread” – something that would be kept with him permanently – but even a “shoelace” – something that he would use temporarily. The significance of this announcement, it has been explained, is that Avraham was not prepared to associate even temporarily with the corruption of Sedom, to even momentarily take possession of its assets, most of which was earned through theft and dishonesty. He therefore announced his refusal to take from Sedom not only a “thread” – something keeping him permanently linked to the sinful city – but also a “shoestring” – something that would only briefly associate him with the corruption of Sedom. Avraham was proclaiming that the evil of Sedom must be firmly and completely rejected, that the city’s cruelty, selfishness, disregard for people, dishonesty and treachery may never be embraced even on a temporary basis. The conduct and value system of Sedom must be rejected and disdained not only as a way of life, but even momentarily. We may not even for a moment embrace or give any validity to the beliefs and principles of Sedom, which were founded upon sheer selfishness and complete neglect of the needs of others.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha the story of Avraham’s marriage to Sara’s maidservant, Hagar. This marriage was initiated by Sara, who said to her husband, “Behold, the Lord has prevented me from giving birth; please come to my maidservant, so maybe I can be built through her” (16:2). Sure enough, Hagar conceived immediately upon marrying Avraham, and she then began treating Sara disrespectfully, taking advantage of her new status of importance in the home.

Rav Moshe Chaim Efrayim of Sidlikov (grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov), in *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*, finds within this sequence of events an allusion to the common phenomenon of compromises made when an ideal vision seems unattainable. Like Sara, we often find that our dreams and aspirations go unfulfilled, and as time passes, we begin to despair. Just as Sara concluded that her desire to bear a child will never be realized, and she therefore decided upon the next best option – “mothering” a child via her maidservant – we, too, sometimes feel compelled to lower our ambitions and settle upon a less-than-ideal but realistic goal in place of our ideal vision. And, as in the case of Sara and Hagar, this plan is very often successful, and we succeed in fulfilling the modest goal which we set for ourselves in place of the ideal standard which we concluded was beyond our reach. (The *Degel Machaneh Efrayim* speaks specifically about the lofty goal of serving God “*li-shmah*,” with purely sincere motives, and *Chazal*’s famous teaching encouraging us to adhere to the lower standard of “*she-lo li-shmah*” when the ideal standard of “*li-shmah*” is impractical.)

However, the *Degel Machaneh Efrayim* warns that just as Hagar disrespected Sara after conceiving, similarly, we might be tempted to look with disdain at the ideal aspirations which we felt compelled to eschew. We might feel the need to mock and ridicule those who continue striving for those ideal standards, comfortable as we now feel with our more relaxed standards. The story of Hagar’s belittling Sara symbolically represents the scorn with which we might view lofty ambitions which we found unattainable. The *Degel Machaneh Efrayim* here teaches that even when we find it necessary to make compromises, we should never lose respect for the ideal standard, and we should never lose our desire to one day be worthy and capable of achieving it. Rather than look with disdain upon those who aspire to those standards – or upon ourselves for having initially harbored such aspirations – we should respect this level of ambition and determination, and always retain our desire to one day realize them.

We might add two other implications of this parallel between the story of Hagar and the ever-present tension between ambition and realism. First, it teaches us that when we find an ideal goal unattainable, we should explore the next best option or options before despairing altogether. Seeing that she was unable to conceive, and concluding that she would never bear a child, Sara did not simply give up. Instead, she found an alternative which, while falling far short from the realization of her dream, still allowed for partially fulfilling it. Very often, even when we cannot achieve our goals completely, there is a way to achieve them at a lower standard, which is far preferable to eschewing them altogether.

Secondly, it cannot be overlooked that Sara was ultimately incorrect in concluding that she could never bear a child: some fourteen years after having Hagar marry Avraham, Sara miraculously conceived and bore a child. Of course, Sara had no way of knowing that a miracle would be performed that would enable her to conceive as an elderly, post-menopausal woman. Nevertheless, this story perhaps reminds us to think long and hard before giving up on a dream. Before concluding that our aspirations lie beyond our grasp, and need to modified to accommodate our realities and our limitations, we should first ascertain that this is indeed the case, that the ideal standard is truly beyond our reach, and that we are not perceiving it as such merely for the sake of convenience. Sometimes, our ideal goals are practical, even if they appear impractical. Before making compromises to accommodate our realities, we must first double check to ensure that such comprises are necessary, and determine whether our highest ambitions are, in fact, within the limitations of reality.

Wednesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham’s refusal to accept the king of Sedom’s offer to keep for himself the city’s possessions which he had rescued. Avraham had led a daring offensive against the four armies that captured the people of Sedom and seized their property, and it was natural for the city’s king to grant Avraham the right to keep the assets which he retrieved. Avraham, however, refused, proclaiming, “I have raised my hand to the Supreme God…[on oath[ that I shall not take from even a thread to a shoestring from all that is yours…” (14:22-23).

The *Ba’al Ha-turim* observes that the word “*harimoti*” – “I have raised” – used in this verse appears in just one other instance in the Torah. Later in Sefer Bereishit (39:15), the Torah tells of the false allegations made by Potifar’s wife against Yosef, whom she accused of attempting to rape her, when he in fact resisted her sexual advances. She alleged that she shouted in response to his assault, and “when he heard that I raised my voice [*harimoti koli*]and called out,” he fled. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* notes the word “*harimoti*” used by Potifar’s wife in this context, and he finds it significant that it appears only in that context and in Avraham’s proclamation refusing to take any of Sedom’s property. To explain the connection between these two contexts, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* writes that this parallel corroborates the Midrashic tradition (*Bereishit Rabba* 85:2) that Potifar’s wife had “altruistic” motives in attempting to lure Yosef to intimacy. The Midrash comments that Potifar’s wife saw through astrology that she and Yosef would share a descendant, and she therefore saw it as her sacred obligation to initiate an intimate relationship with him in order to realize this destiny. (In the end, this prediction materialized through her daughter, who married Yosef.) The *Ba’a Ha-turim* thus comments that the unique term “*harimoti*” shared by Avraham’s pronouncement to the king of Sedom and Potifar’s wife’s accusation against Yosef alludes to the fact that Potifar’s wife acted with altruistic motives, just as Avraham was driven by his idealistic principles to decline the opportunity to become wealthy by keeping the property of Sedom.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Darkhei Chayim*, observes that the *Ba’al Ha-turim* here makes a startling comparison – likening Avraham’s piety expressed through his refusal to accept an enormous fortune offered to him, and Potifar’s wife sincerity in initiating an adulterous relationship. We would be hard pressed to find two more different examples of “sincerity,” of decisions made with pure motives. Although *Chazal* attribute Potifar’s wife’s seduction to altruistic motives, can these motives have been anywhere near as pure as Avraham’s idealism in turning down the offer made by Sedom’s king?

Evidently, Rav Elazary writes, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* precisely seeks to warn that even the purest, sincerest of motives can lead to the most grievous wrongful actions. A person can have the sincerity of Avraham Avinu yet still end up committing nefarious sins like that of Potifar’s wife. Moreover, we might add, the sincerer and more idealistic a person is in charting his or her course, the lower the chances are of that person’s conscience intervening to discourage him or her from committing the act, and the more likely the person is to commit the act with determination and fervor. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* here reminds us that pure intentions do not necessarily produce pure actions, that we must carefully scrutinize our decisions to ensure that we not only want and intend to live and act the right way, but actually live and act the right way.

Thursday

Parashat Lekh-Lekha concludes by telling of God’s command to Avraham that he and his descendants undergo *berit mila* – circumcision, the sign on a person’s body of our nation’s covenant with God. The Torah tells that Avraham complied with God’s command and underwent the procedure of *berit mila*, indicating that he did so without any ambivalence or hesitation. Moreover, the Torah emphasizes that Avraham performed *berit mila* “*be-etzem ha-yom ha-zeh*” – “right on this day” (17:26), seemingly stressing the fact that Avraham fulfilled this command the same day it was issued.

However, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 47:10) relates that after Avraham performed *berit mila*, he felt uneasy about the consequences of his circumcision. He feared that whereas before his *berit mila* wayfarers in need of food and lodging would often come to his home, now, after his *berit mila*, they would not visit him. It seems that the *berit mila* resulted in a degree of distance and tension between Avraham and his contemporaries. Whether it was due to the act itself, which appears peculiar to those not accustomed to it, or the unique, distinctive status which the *berit mila* signifies, Avraham sensed a barrier of sorts erected as a result of the *mila*, an inability to relate to and associate with others to the same extent as he has beforehand. The Midrash continues that the Almighty responded to Avraham’s concerns by saying, “Before you were circumcised, people would come to you; now, I, in My glory, come and reveal Myself to you!” Indeed, immediately after Avraham’s circumcision, we are told, “The Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei” (18:1).

It appears that the Midrash here seeks to depict the experience of loneliness that often ensues from our relationship with God. Devoting ourselves sincerely and wholeheartedly to the Almighty will, almost invariably, interfere with our social relationships. On a national level, certainly, our religious beliefs and practices have often exposed us to the scorn, derision and hostility of other peoples, who singled us out for persecution. And individually, too, our relationship to God all but necessarily infringes upon our relationships to other people. It makes us stand out and live differently than other people, which results in a degree of distance and tension, and our religious obligations and restrictions deny us numerous social opportunities and options. The Midrash assures us that this feeling of loneliness is solved by our relationship with God, that His company and involvement in our lives more than compensate for the lost companionship caused by our religious commitment. The isolation solitude that we at times experience due to the social opportunities we must forfeit as committed Torah Jews are cured by our closeness to our Creator, by the awareness of His constant presence in our lives and the privilege we have to serve and to turn to Him at any time.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells about Avraham’s military offensive against the alliance of armies that invaded the city of Sedom and captured the city’s inhabitants, including Avraham’s nephew, Lot. As soon as Avraham heard that his nephew fell captive, he mobilized a small army that pursued the invaders and succeeded in rescuing the people of Sedom and the city’s property.

In describing the battle, the Torah emphasizes (according to one interpretation of the verse) that Avraham’s men reached the armies at midnight – “*va-yeichaleik aleihem layla*” (literally, “The night split for them” – 14:15). The Midrash, commenting on this verse, explains the significance of the night “splitting” for Avraham, teaching, “*Yotzero chilko*” – “His Creator divided it.” Meaning, as the Midrash continues, “The Almighty said: Their forefather acted for Me at midnight, so I, too, will act for his children at midnight. When? In Egypt.” The Midrash draws an association between Avraham’s courageous nighttime assault on the armies that captured Lot, and the Exodus from Egypt, which occurred when God struck the Egyptian firstborn at midnight (Shemot 12:29). Just as Avraham “acted for” God at midnight, pursuing his nephew’s captors, God “acted for” Avraham’s descendants at midnight, striking the Egyptians and freeing *Benei Yisrael* from bondage. And thus God “divided” the night, in a sense, making a “deal” of sorts with Avraham, with Avraham doing his share by rescuing Lot, and God doing His share, so-to-speak, by rescuing Avraham’s descendants from Egyptian slavery.

How might we explain this connection drawn by the Midrash between the rescue of Lot from captivity and the rescue of *Benei Yisrael* from bondage?

The common denominator between these two events, it would seem, is that neither Lot nor *Benei Yisrael* deserved to be rescued. Lot had betrayed his uncle’s faith and values by choosing to settle in the sinful city of Sedom (as *Chazal* noted, famously cited by Rashi to 13:11), and, as such, he could be said to have deserved the fate that befell the city. Likewise, tradition teaches that *Benei Yisrael* were not worthy of being redeemed from Egypt, as they had embraced pagan worship and distanced themselves from the faith of their patriarchs over the course of the Egyptian exile. (This is stated explicitly and in detail by the prophet Yechezkel, chapter 20.) And yet, Avraham risked his life to rescue Lot, and God overturned the laws of nature in order to rescue *Benei Yisrael*. Avraham did not excuse himself from helping Lot due to Lot’s fault for the situation; instead, he did everything he needed to do, even exposing himself to great danger, for the sake of rescuing him. In reward, God came to rescue Avraham’s descendants from oppression and captivity despite their being unworthy of His help, following the example set by Avraham who rescued Lot from a crisis situation of his own doing.

Significantly, the Midrash describes Avraham’s courageous campaign with the words, “*pa’al imi*” – “acted for Me,” as though Avraham did a “personal favor” for the Almighty. This can only mean that exerting effort for the sake of one’s fellow in distress – even when that person is fully to blame for his or her crisis – is something done for the sake of God, as it were. God continues loving and caring for His beloved children even when they make grave mistakes and miscalculations that bring ruin upon themselves. He wants us to help other people even if they are at fault, and not necessarily deserving of our assistance. Just as we ask God for many things which, as we must acknowledge if we think about it honestly, we do not necessarily deserve, we must likewise lend assistance to people who need help even if we deem them unworthy of assistance. When we do so, we are considered as having done a “personal favor” for God, caring for and helping His precious children.

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Monday