**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT LEKH-LEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of Avraham’s experiences after resettling in Canaan, including his decision to temporarily leave Canaan when a drought struck the region, and move to Egypt, where, apparently, food was available. There his wife, Sara, was abducted by Pharaoh, and God punished the Egyptian king for taking a married woman into his palace, prompting Pharaoh to return Sara and send her and Avraham out of the country. The Torah relates that after Sara was taken to Pharaoh, Avraham – who had disguised as Sara’s brother – was showered with gifts (12:16).

Many commentators noted that whereas in this instance Avraham did not hesitate to receive gifts that were offered to him by a wealthy king, later, when a different king offered him riches, he refused. After four empires captured and ransacked Sedom and the other cities in the Jordan River Valley, Avraham mobilized a small army and launched a surprise attack against the four kings, defeating them and rescuing the people and property of Sedom. Upon Avraham’s triumphant return, he was greeted by Sedom’s king, who offered Avraham all the property which he had rescued from the four armies. Although Avraham was certainly entitled to – at very least – a sizable portion of this property which he had saved, he declined to keep “even a thread and even a shoe strap” (14:23), explaining that he did not want the king of Sedom to take credit for Avraham’s wealth. The question naturally arises as to why Avraham declined the offer made by Sedom’s king but had no qualms about receiving the gifts showed on him by Pharaoh.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary (12:14-19), suggests an answer as part of his general analysis of Avraham’s situation upon arriving in Egypt. He explains that Avraham told Sara that they should pose as siblings because then an Egyptian man who desired Sara would attempt to win the favor of her “brother” so he would allow him to marry her. If she were believed to be married, then the desirous man would simply kill Avraham and then seize the widow. By posing as Sara’s brother, Avraham hoped to buy time. Since in any event his sojourn in Egypt was temporary, he figured that eventually, over the course of the period in which suitors made their attempts to win Avraham’s consent to allow them to marry Sara, they would leave. What Avraham did not expect was that the king would desire Sara. When this happened, they were at Pharaoh’s mercy, and the king had Sara forcefully brought to his palace, where he kept her while showering Avraham with gifts in order to earn his favor, attempting to gain Avraham’s consent before resorting to forcefully marrying Sara. Under such conditions, Rav Hirsch explains, Avraham was not able to refuse the gifts, for if he had, then Pharaoh would have simply married Sara without Avraham’s consent.

A surprising answer is given by Rabbeinu Bechayei, in his commentary (as well as by Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*). Without explicitly addressing this question, Rabbeinu Bechayei notes that the Torah does not actually say that Pharaoh gave Avraham gifts. Rather, it says that Pharaoh “dealt kindly” (“*heitiv*”) with Avraham on account of Sara, and that Avraham “had sheep, cattle, donkeys…” According to Rabbeinu Bechayei, this means that Avraham was left with the possessions he had brought with him to Egypt. Avraham did not receive anything new, but was rather left alone, due to his connections with the palace, and so he was able to keep all his belongings. As such, Avraham did not, in fact, receive any gifts, and he would have refused any gifts he was offered, just as he later refused the gifts offered by the king of Sedom.

Of course, the plain meaning of the text does not support Rabbeinu Bechayei’s understanding, as it certainly sounds as though Avraham received wealth on account of Sara’s joining Pharaoh’s harem. Moreover, the Torah tells that Avraham returned from Egypt a very wealthy man (13:2), and considering that he had moved to Egypt due to financial hardship in Canaan, there seems to be no explanation for his wealth other than the gifts showered upon him by Pharaoh during his sojourn in Egypt.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the question raised by numerous commentators as to why Avraham on one occasion accepted lavish gifts offered by a wealthy king, but he turned down such an offer made on a later occasion. During his brief sojourn in Egypt, Avraham’s wife was taken to Pharaoh’s palace, and as a result, Avraham was showered with gifts (12:16), such that he returned to Canaan a very wealthy man (13:2). Later, however, after Avraham led a military attack against the four armies that had captured the people and property of Sedom, he declined the offer made by the king of Sedom that Avraham keep the property which he had rescued (14:22-23). Many different theories have been advanced to explain why Avraham accepted Pharaoh’s gifts but declined the offer made by the king of Sedom.

One simple explanation, perhaps, is that Avraham refused to accept the wealth of Sedom to avoid giving the impression that he went to battle for the sake of personal gain. In principle, Avraham was not averse to accepting lavish gifts, as he did in Egypt. However, after leading a fierce battle, which resulted in the death of many people, it was imperative that Avraham make it perfectly clear that he had no ulterior motives in launching his offensive, that this was done purely for the sake of justice, to rescue his nephew and the other captives. Indeed, the Midrash (cited in *Torah Sheleima*, chapter 14, #147) comments on Avraham’s declining the king of Sedom’s offer, “At that moment, Avraham glorified the Name of the Almighty, [ensuring] that the king of Sedom would not think that Avraham waged war against the four kings for the sake of money.” Avraham sacrificed an enormous amount of wealth for the sake of bringing glory to the faith he preached, in order to make certain that he would not be accused of waging war for the sake of profit. He was perfectly entitled to keep the riches he rescued, but he forfeited them for his and his religion’s reputation. And so although he had no reason not to accept the gifts sent to him by Pharaoh, he felt compelled to decline the offer made by the king of Sedom.

Avraham’s example shows us that we must be prepared to forfeit even that to which we are rightfully entitled for the sake of the Jewish People’s reputation, to avoid giving the impression of greed. The fact that we are technically owed or eligible for a sum of money or a certain privilege does not necessarily mean we should insist on receiving it. Just as Avraham feared leaving room for his adversaries to charge that he fought a war for money, so must we be wary of those who jump at every opportunity to disparage the Jewish People and accuse us of greed and manipulation. And just as Avraham forfeited a large fortune for the sake of protecting his religion’s reputation, so must we be prepared to sacrifice even that which we rightfully deserve to avoid appearing unethical and selfish.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekh tells of the prophecy of “*berit bein ha-betarim*,” in which God informed Avraham that his descendants would be enslaved in a foreign country, promising that “afterward, they will leave with great possessions” (15:13). The conventional reading of this verse is that it foresees the enormous fortune that *Benei Yisrael* brought with them out of Egypt. As we read in Sefer Shemot (11:2-3), God instructed *Benei Yisrael* before the Exodus to ask the Egyptians for their utensils and clothing, and the Egyptians – who, after suffering the ten plagues, held *Benei Yisrael* in high esteem – gladly complied. The Torah emphasizes that as *Benei Yisrael* left Egypt, they took all of Egypt’s wealth with them (Shemot 12:36). It is thus commonly assumed that when God informed Avraham that his descendants would leave their state of bondage with “*rekhush gadol*” (“great possessions”), He referred to the wealth which *Benei Yisrael* brought with them out of Egypt.

However, Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, offers a very creative, and surprising, interpretation of this verse. He notes the distinction between the phrase “*rekhush* ***gadol***” and the Torah’s description earlier in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the fight that broke out between Avraham’s shepherds and Lot’s shepherds – “*ki haya rekhusham* ***rav***” – “for their possessions were abundant” (13:6). Whereas God foresaw *Benei Yisrael* leaving with “*rekhush* ***gadol***,” the Torah describes Avraham and Lot as having “*rekhush* ***rav***” which created tensions among the shepherds charged with finding pasture for all their sheep. Rav Mecklenberg suggests that the difference between the words “*gadol*” (literally, “large”) and “*rav*” (“abundant,” or “many”) is the difference between quality and quantity. “*Rav*” refers to a large quantity, whereas “*gadol*” refers to qualitative significance. Based on this distinction, Rav Mecklenberg proposes a novel reading of God’s prophecy to Avraham – explaining that *Benei Yisrael* would leave Egypt not with riches, but rather with spiritual and emotional “wealth.” The period of bondage and oppression, Rav Mecklenberg writes, prepared *Benei Yisrael* to become servants of God. This difficult experience gave them the strength and fortitude needed for them to accept upon themselves the obligations and responsibilities of the Torah. This is the “*rekhush gadol*” that *Benei Yisrael* took with them when they left Egypt.

While it may be difficult to accept this reading of the verse, this interpretation perhaps teaches us that harsh circumstances can provide us with “*rekhush gadol*” – precious and worthwhile “possessions.” Times of hardship often build our inner strength and help us to reassess our priorities. While we of course hope and pray to never have to face hardship, when we do confront difficult situations, we must look for the “*rekhush gadol*” they bring us, and appreciate the hidden blessings and the “fortune” that we can gain from them.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha (13:7-11) that Avraham and his nephew, Lot, who had joined him when he journeyed to and settled in Canaan, decided they needed to part ways. During their brief sojourn in Egypt, they amassed considerable wealth, including large amounts of cattle, and upon returning to Canaan, their shepherds quarreled with one another over pasture. Avraham approached Lot and proposed that they separate, offering Lot the right to choose where to relocate. Lot chose to settle among the sinful population of Sedom – a decision which resulted in his being taken captive when four empires captured Sedom and its surrounding cities. Avraham led a battle against the four armies in order to rescue Lot, thus saving his life. Lot’s life was endangered again later, when God destroyed Sedom and the other cities in the region, rescuing Lot in Avraham’s merit (19:29).

Commenting on this sequence of events – whereby Lot’s separation from Avraham nearly caused his death – the *Midrash Ha-gadol* writes, “Fighting is severe, for it brings danger to life.” The fact that Lot nearly lost his life as a result of the friction that arose between him and Avraham shows that *machaloket* – fighting and strife – is considered such a severe spiritual ill that it can result in a life-threatening situation.

How might we explain this perspective on fighting – that it threatens a person’s life?

Just as Lot’s inability to reside peacefully with Avraham led him to relocate somewhere he should never have lived, similarly, conflicts can sometimes lead people in directions they should not be following, and to decisions they should not be making. A person embroiled in a conflict might end up purposely moving in a direction directly opposite that of the other party, purely for the sake of expressing resentment and opposition. We might suggest that at least symbolically, Lot’s decision to move to Sedom, a society whose culture diametrically opposed everything Avraham represented, reflects the tendency to move specifically opposite the other party to the conflict. In this sense, conflicts indeed threaten a person’s life – in that they run the risk of leading a person in a direction that he should not follow, to build a life that is very different from the one he is meant to build. In his passionate insistence to oppose those whom he resents, one is likely to make wrong decisions and embrace the wrong beliefs and lifestyle. By working to live peacefully with others, we are spared from this tendency to choose specifically that which our adversaries oppose, and we can make our life decisions rationally – and we are thus spared from the danger of losing the lives that we are supposed to live.

Of course, there is also danger in making decisions and charting one’s course in order to win other people’s approval and friendship. We are prone to risking our “lives” when we allow other people to dictate for us the way we are to act, what our priorities should be, and what goals we should pursue. But the Midrash here draws our attention to the opposite phenomenon – where people make decisions with the specific intention to dissent, to work against those with whom they are in conflict. We should chart the course in life that we honestly feel is right for us, rather than charting a course that pleases those whom we respect or that opposes those whom we resent.

Wednesday

We read in the opening verses of Parashat Lekh-Lekha the promises God made to Avraham when commanding him to leave his homeland and settle in Canaan. After promising to produce a great nation from his descendants and to grant him fame, God then said, “I shall bless those who bless you” (12:3). Chizkuni explains that this promise was made to allay Avraham’s fears that he would have no peers or supporters in Canaan. God assured Avraham that He would bestow blessing upon those who assist him, such that he would earn the friendship and support of many people.

*Ba’al Ha-turim*, interestingly enough, finds an allusion in this phrase to *birkat kohanim* – the blessing with which the *kohanim* bless the rest of the nation. The Torah writes in Sefer Bamidbar (6:27) that God promises that after the *kohanim* bless *Benei Yisrael*, “I shall bless them,” and Rashi brings an interpretation that this refers to God’s blessing the *kohanim*. In reward for the *kohanim* blessing *Benei Yisrael*, God will then bless the *kohanim*. And so *Ba’al Ha-turim* creatively suggests that when God promises Avraham, “I shall bless those who bless you,” this refers, or alludes, to God’s blessing those among Avraham’s descendants who bless the other descendants – meaning, the *kohanim*, who bless the rest of the nation. *Ba’al Ha-turim* determined that the phrase “*va-avarekha mevarekhekha*” (“I shall bless those who bless you”) has the same *gematria* (numerical value) as the Hebrew phrase, “there will be *kohanim* blessing your descendants.”

Why might have *Ba’al Ha-turim* found an allusion to *birkat kohanim* in God’s initial prophecy to Avraham, when He informed Avraham of the special nation that he would produce?

Perhaps the *Ba’al Ha-turim*’s comments teach that one of the intended defining characteristics of our nation is that we “bless” one another, we wish for each other’s wellbeing, we pray for one another, and we encourage and support one another. The institution of *birkat kohanim*, whereby the special tribe designated for a unique spiritual stature blesses the rest of the nation each day, powerfully expresses the notion that the different groups among *Am Yisrael* are not in competition or in conflict with one another, but rather are to aim to serve and assist one another. The *kohanim*’s stature is not intended to detach them from the rest of the nation, but rather for them to serve the rest of the nation, to work towards elevating them, helping them and inspiring them. By finding an allusion to *birkat kohanim* in God’s initial prophecy to Avraham, *Ba’al Ha-turim* might be indicating that this institution reflects one of the fundamental qualities of *Am Yisrael* – that we are all to look out for and encourage one another, to see our fellow Jew as a member of our own “team” with whom we seek to work together, and not against whom we seek to compete.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the conflict that arose between Avraham’s shepherds and those of his nephew, Lot, prompting Avraham to propose that they part ways (13:6-12). Rashi (13:7), based on the Midrash, explains that Lot’s shepherds brought their herds to graze in private fields, and Avraham’s shepherds reprimanded them for stealing other people’s pasture. Lot’s shepherds responded that since God had promised all of Canaan to Avraham, who had no children, Lot – his nephew – was the de facto inheritor, and so all pasture in Canaan rightfully belonged to Lot. Rashi writes that for this reason the Torah emphasizes in this context that “the Canaanites and Prizites then resided in the land” – to explain that Lot’s shepherds were mistaken, as God’s promise to Avraham had not yet been fulfilled, since other peoples resided in the land at that time and had rights to it. Although God promised all of Canaan to Avraham’s descendants, the time had not yet come for the promise’s fulfillment, and so the property rights of the land’s inhabitants had to be respected.

Further insight into this conflict can be gleaned from the Midrashic account in *Bereishit Rabba* (41:5) from which Rashi’s comments are drawn. The Midrash relates that upon seeing Lot’s shepherds bring their flocks to private pasture, Avraham’s shepherds said just two words: “*Hutar ha-gezel*?” – “Is theft allowed?”

Lot’s shepherds replied, “This is what the Almighty said to Avraham: ‘I shall give this land to your offspring’ – and Avraham is a sterile mule; tomorrow he will die and his nephew, Lot, will inherit him. And so that which we eat – we are eating from his [property]!”

It is hard not to notice in the Midrash’s account the difference in the tones and styles of the two groups of shepherds. Avraham’s shepherds expressed their criticism very briefly and gently, in the form of a simple question whose answer was self-understood. Lot’s shepherds, however, responded in an offensive, brutish manner, calling Avraham a “sterile mule,” and anticipating his imminent death. Rather than respectfully presenting their counterclaim, they instead found it necessary to insult Avraham.

As some have noted, it is not coincidental that the shepherds presented their flawed argument in a disrespectful, callous manner. Very often, it is those who advance a weak argument that must resort to cheap rhetoric in an effort to sound persuasive. Speakers of truth can leave the facts to speak for themselves, while purveyors of falsehood must make use of anger and vitriol to market their wrong ideas.

Significantly, Avraham did not bother responding to the claims of Lot’s shepherds. Realizing that Lot’s camp was not interested in an honest, substantive discussion of this issue, he proposed that they peacefully separate. Constructive dialogue can work only when both parties come with an open mind and an honest commitment to arrive at the truth. When one party resorts to insults and scorn, this usually indicates that winning the argument is more important to them than reaching the truth – at which point it is best to peacefully end the discussion, rather than engage that party any further.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of Avraham’s miraculous military over the four armies that had captured the people and property of Sedom. After the battle, the king of Sedom greeted Avraham, and offered, “*Tein li ha-nefesh ve-ha-rekhush kach lakh*” – “Give me the people, and take the property for yourself” (14:21). The king was prepared to allow Avraham to keep all the property he had rescued, in exchange for the return of all the captives. Avraham refused to accept any of the property of Sedom, expressing his fear that the king would then take credit for Avraham’s wealth.

Netziv, in his *Herchev Davar*, raises the question of whether Avraham’s refusal to accept the property meant that he received the people as his servants. Did Avraham refuse to take both the property and the captives, or did he relinquish his rights to the property in exchange for rights to the people whom he freed, whom the king of Sedom wanted returned to him?

Netziv notes that the Gemara and Midrash seem to be divided on this issue. The Gemara in Masekhet Nedarim (32a) cites Rabbi Yochanan’s remark that Avraham was punished for “keeping people away from coming under the wings of the *Shekhina*” – and citing this verse in Parashat Lekh-Lekha as his source. This seems to mean that Avraham did not insist on receiving the freed captives, which meant that instead of coming under his influence and likely embracing monotheism, the people instead returned to the sinful, corrupt influence of Sedom (and were, presumably, later killed when God destroyed the city). Clearly, Rabbi Yochanan understood that when Avraham declined the offer to receive the property, he did not ask for the people in exchange, and they returned to Sedom.

However, the Midrash in *Bereishit Rabba* (48:6) comments in reference to Avraham’s declining the king’s offer that he embodied the description in Sefer Yeshayahu (33:15) of “*no’er kapav mi-temokh be-shochad*” – one who refuses to accept bribes. The Midrash quite clearly understood the king’s offer to Avraham as an attempted bribe, an attempt to lure Avraham to relinquish his rights to the people whom he freed by granting him the property in their place. Avraham refused to accept this “bribe” – and, apparently, insisted on keeping the freed captives.

Netziv then proceeds to explain that the people whose status was being negotiated were not the ordinary citizens of Sedom, but specifically the king’s servants. Although Avraham relinquished his rights to the property which he had rescued from the four armies, he refused to hand over the servants. Netziv explains that these servants did not want to return to the king’s service, and so it would have been wrong for Avraham to give up his rights to them. Although Avraham did not want to take anything from Sedom, he felt he did not have the right to adhere to this policy at the expense of these servants; he could not send them back to serve the king of Sedom against their will just because of his preference not to benefit from the war he just waged. He therefore refused the “bribe” offered by the king, and he took these servants under his wing.

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