**S.A.L.T. –PARASHAT LEKH-LEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the fight that erupted between Avraham’s shepherds and those of his nephew, Lot, after they returned to Canaan from Egypt with great wealth. Avraham suggested that he and Lot part ways, and Lot chose to relocate in the Jordan River Valley. The Torah tells that whereas Avraham remained in the Canaanite hills, Lot settled in the cities in the valley, “*va-ye’ehal ad Sedom*” – “and he pitched his tent until Sedom” (13:12).

Rashi explains this phrase as a reference to tents which Lot pitched for his shepherds and herds. It seems likely that Rashi’s intent is that Lot himself lived in the city of Sedom, and he pitched tents “*ad Sedom*” – near the city – for his flocks and the shepherds tending to them. Rashi felt compelled to arrive at this interpretation because we know from later verses that Lot resided in Sedom, not near Sedom. When the four kingdoms plundered Sedom and its surrounding cities, taking the residents – including Lot – as captives, the Torah writes explicitly that Lot was living in Sedom (“*ve-hu yosheiv bi-Sdom*” – 14:12). Moreover, when the two angels arrived in Sedom, Lot approached them and invited them into his home, clearly indicating that he lived not near Sedom, but in Sedom. Therefore, Rashi felt that when the Torah speaks of Lot pitching his tent “until Sedom,” it must mean not that his home was “until Sedom,” but rather that he pitched tents outside the city for his cattle and shepherds.

Malbim explains differently, understanding this verse to mean that Lot’s migration occurred in several different stages. In describing Lot’s decision of where to live, the Torah (13:10) does not say that Lot chose Sedom, but rather that he desired the “*kikar ha-Yardein*” – the Jordan River Valley. Malbim understood that Lot did not initially plan on moving to Sedom, because he was aware of the corrupt nature of the city’s population. Rather, his plan was to live in isolation elsewhere in the valley. At a later stage, however, Lot journeyed away from his original location (“*va-yisa Lot mi-kedem*” – 13:11), and settled “*be-arei ha-kikar*,” in the towns in the valley (13:12), and eventually, “*va-ye’ehal ad Sedom*” – he ended up settling in Sedom. According to Malbim, then, Lot’s transition from living with his righteous uncle to living among the wicked people of Sedom unfolded incrementally, in several stages, and this is the meaning of the phrase “*va-ye’ehal ad Sedom*.”

Somewhat similarly, Rabbeinu Efrayim writes that Lot initially settled outside the city of Sedom, until he received permission to join the city. And thus the Torah tells, “*va-ye’ehal ad Sedom*,” that he arrived near Sedom, without actually moving into the city, as it was only later that he was accepted as a resident of Sedom.

Chizkuni advances a much different approach, claiming that Lot did not, in fact, live in Sedom, but rather settled just outside the city, and this is the meaning of the phrase, “*va-ye’ehal ad Sedom*.” For this reason, Chizkuni writes, the Torah later (19:1) tells that when the two angels arrived in Sedom, “*ve-Lot yosheiv be-sha’ar Sedom*” – Lot resided “in the gate of Sedom.” According to Chizkuni, this means that Lot’s home was situated in the area of the gate, just outside the city. He explains that although Lot wished to enjoy the material benefits of the prosperous Jordan River Valley region, he did not want to reside among the wicked people of Sedom, and so he settled just outside the city. As for the Torah’s description of Lot residing in Sedom at the time of the city’s plundering by the four kings, Chizkuni (14:12) explains that due to the war situation, Lot entered the city for safety. The Torah mentions that Lot was residing in Sedom at the time of the plundering precisely because he normally did not live in the city, but he went inside the gate into the city hoping to find refuge from the approaching armies of the four kings. After he was captured and then freed by Avraham, he returned to his home by the city gate.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of Avraham’s decision to separate from his nephew, Lot, after both men became wealthy and their shepherds began quarreling. Avraham turned to Lot and suggested they part ways, offering Lot the choice of where to live: “If to the left – I will go right; if to the right – I will go left” (13:9).

Rav Reuven Horowitz of Zarnovtza, in *Dudaim Ba-sadeh*, sees Avraham’s offer to Lot as a model of the attitude we must all have towards our inner “Lot,” our negative inclinations with which we often find ourselves bitterly quarreling. Just as Avraham resolved to restore peace by separating from Lot, so will we find inner “peace” and satisfaction by firmly and resolutely “separating” from our sinful tendencies. Right and left, Rav Reuven of Zarnovtza noted, are often seen as corresponding, respectively, to the realms of sanctity and impurity. The right is commonly associated with holiness, whereas the left is regarded as a symbol of sin and desecration. Accordingly, Avraham’s offer to Lot – “If to the left – I will go right; if to the right – I will go left” – expresses our firm rejection of our negative inclinations, regardless of the direction along which they seek to lead us. Most commonly, they seek to push us to the “left” – to defilement, to commit clear-cut violations. We must respond by pushing ourselves to the “right,” towards sanctity, towards firm, unwavering devotion to Torah study and *mitzva* observance.

However, there are some occasions when to the contrary, our evil inclination pulls us towards the “right” – towards actions, words and attitudes which outwardly appear sacred and righteous. For example, sometimes we are inclined to perform an inherently noble, religious act at a time or under circumstances when it is inappropriate. On some occasions, people find it proper to malign or offensively criticize others’ wrongful behavior when such a response is counterproductive or just plain wrong. And there are times when we might want to place special emphasis on one area of religious life, thereby compromising our commitment to other areas. In all such situations, the evil inclination appears to pull us to the “right,” in the direction of spiritual greatness, when in reality, this is the wrong direction to take.

Just as Avraham realized that he needed to remain apart from Lot whichever direction Lot chose, so must we resolve to reject our negative impulses in whichever manner they confront us, even – or especially – when they lure us to perform what outwardly appears to be a noble act.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of the war waged between four powerful kingdoms against the armies of the five cities of the Jordan River Valley (led by the two major cities, Sedom and Amora). The five cities had been subservient to Eilam, one of the four empires, and then rebelled. These cities attacked the armies of Eilam and its allies in the Eimek Ha-sidim region, where they were resoundingly defeated by the four kingdoms. The Torah tells (14:10) that the kings of Sedom and Amora fell into “*be’erot cheimar*” – mudpits – in Eimek Ha-sidim, before the armies of the four powers plundered Sedom, Amora and the other cities, seizing all their possessions and taking their populations as captives. Avraham later mobilized an army and launched a surprise attack on the four armies, defeating them and freeing the captives.

After the war, the Torah (14:17-20) tells of a celebration held in Avraham’s honor, which was attended by the king of Sedom. Whereas earlier we read that Sedom’s ruler – along with the king of Amora – “fell” into the mudpits, we now read that he survived the war. Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni (14:10) explain that when the Torah tells of these kings “falling” in the mudpits, it means that they hid there, not that they were killed. Others, however, explain that they had fallen into and been trapped in the mudpits, but the king of Sedom managed to survive. Rashi (14:10) cites the Midrash as explaining that Sedom’s king miraculously survived the mudpits, adding that God performed this miracle because some did not believe the story of Avraham’s having survived the furnace into which he had been thrown for rejecting idolatry. When God miraculously rescued the king of Sedom, this somehow confirmed the miracle of Avraham in the furnace.

What might be the significance of this miracle, and how does it relate to Avraham’s miraculous survival in the furnace?

It has been suggested that the king of Sedom’s experience of being trapped in “*cheimar*” (mud, or cement) symbolizes submergence in “*chomer*” – physicality, indulgence in worldly pleasures. The population of Sedom and the surrounding cities was selfish and indulgent, “submerged” in the pursuit of wealth and enjoyment. As we know from earlier in this *parasha* (13:10), Lot chose to live in this region because of its luxurious lifestyle. And later (chapter 19), we read of how the people of Sedom forbade hospitality. This was a society obsessed with material delights and luxury, to the point of forbidding sharing their benefits with any outsiders. The image of the kings of Sedom and Amora submerged in “*cheimar*” might thus illustrate their society’s “submergence” in “*chomer*,”physical indulgence. The miracle of the king’s rescue, then, might be understood as the Midrash’s reassurance to those who feel trapped in the “mudpits” of excessive indulgence. The Midrash perhaps teaches that even when we find ourselves “submerged” in physicality, trapped in a pattern of sinful habits, and even when we feel there is no way to escape, we must not despair, because we are capable of extricating ourselves from the “pit” and returning to the proper path of behavior.

And for this reason, it has been explained, the Midrash likens this miracle to Avraham’s emergence from the fiery furnace. Our *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination) is commonly compared to a fire which rages within us and lures us to act against our values and principles. Avraham’s miraculous survival in the furnace, then, might symbolize not only his descendants’ miraculous survival in the face of unrelenting persecution, but also each individual’s ability to spiritually survive even when engulfed by the “flames” of sinful impulses. We are endowed with the ability to resist negative pressures and temptations of all kinds, to extricate ourselves from the “mudpits” of vain pleasures even when it might appear that we are trapped with no possibility of escape.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham’s experiences when he moved from Canaan to Egypt to escape the harsh drought conditions that struck Canaan. The Torah relates that Pharaoh’s ministers saw Avraham’s wife, Sara, “*va-yehalelu otah el Pharaoh*” – “and they praised her to Pharaoh” (12:15). Sara was then taken to Pharaoh’s palace, whereupon God punished Pharaoh and his family.

The straightforward meaning of the phrase “*va-yehalelu otah el Pharaoh*” is that Pharaoh’s noblemen came to Pharaoh and described to him Sara’s beauty, and he then ordered them to bring Sara to the palace. Rashi, however, interprets this verse differently. He explains that the officers spoke among themselves in praise of Sara’s appearance, noting that she was suitable for the king. They did not, according to Rashi, actually speak to Pharaoh about Sara, but rather discussed her attractive appearance among themselves, and then proceeded to bring her to Pharaoh. Rashi presumably reached this conclusion on the basis of the fact that the Torah does not mention Pharaoh giving the order to bring Sara; it appears that this was his ministers’ initiative. Therefore, Rashi understood “*va-yehalelu otah el Pharaoh*” to mean not that the ministers actually spoke to Pharaoh, but rather they spoke about Sara’s suitability for Pharaoh, and then decided on their own – without consulting with the king – to bring her to the palace.

It appears that according to Rashi, the word “*el*” (“to”) in this verse actually means “*al*” – “about,” or “regarding.” Alternatively, however, it has been suggested that we may maintain the conventional reading of the word “*el*” even according to Rashi’s understanding. Since Pharaoh’s ministers were thinking about and discussing the king’s interests, they were considered as though they were speaking directly to him. When we have somebody in our minds and concern ourselves with fulfilling that person’s wishes, this amounts to a kind of “communication,” to the point where we can be said, in some sense, to be speaking to that individual. Just as Pharaoh’s officers are described as having praised Sara “to him” even though they were speaking among themselves about him, similarly, we connect to people even when we are not directly communicating with them, if we have their needs and concerns in our minds.

This concept, as some have suggested, can be applied also to our relationship with God. We connect with God even when we do not directly speak to Him, by keeping Him in our minds at all times, by always thinking of how we can serve Him to the best of our ability. Our relationship to the Almighty is forged not only through prayer, but also throughout the day, by considering at every moment how He wants us to conduct ourselves. This mindset, too, is a form of “communication” whereby we develop a close bond with our Creator.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha (chapter 14) tells of the military operation that Avraham waged with a small army against the four armies that had captured Sedom and Amora, and took their inhabitants captives. Avraham launched his attack upon hearing that his nephew, Lot, who had lived in Sedom, was among the captives, and he miraculously triumphed, defeating the four armies and freeing all the people of Sedom.

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:3) states that Avraham underwent and withstood ten “trials,” without explaining what these trials were. Different lists are presented by the various commentators, but all seem to agree that Avraham’s war against the four empires who had captured Sedom ranks among these ten tests. With an army numbering just 318 men (14:14), Avraham risked his life by heading out to battle against a force consisting of four armies, and this was one of his ten “tests.”

Rav Yosef Salant, in his *Be’er Yosef* (Parashat Lekh-Lekha), raises the question of why this battle is regarded as one of Avraham’s “trials” when Avraham – so it seems – voluntarily took this challenge upon himself. The other trials listed by the commentators involve difficult commands which Avraham received, such as leaving his homeland, and sacrificing his son, or difficult circumstances into which he was thrust against his will, such as having his life threatened for rejecting idolatry, and facing a severe famine in Canaan. The war against the four empires, however, was a challenge which Avraham voluntarily undertook for the sake of rescuing his nephew. Can this really be considered a “trial” if Avraham chose to place himself in this life-threatening situation?

Rav Salant answered by noting Rashi’s comment that Avraham had made a commitment to Lot before he left and settled in Sedom. When an argument broke out between Avraham’s and Lot’s shepherds, Avraham proposed to Lot that they part ways, offering Lot the choice of where to settle (13:9). Rashi writes that Avraham pledged to Lot at this time, “Wherever you reside, I will not be distant from you, and I will be there for you for protection and assistance.” Avraham’s decision to wage war to rescue his nephew was not purely voluntary. It was the fulfillment of the promise he had made to Lot, that although they were parting ways, he would always be ready and prepared to offer Lot assistance when this was needed.

For this reason, Rav Salant explained, this battle is listed among Avraham’s trials. He was compelled to go to war because if he didn’t, he would be in violation of his commitment to his nephew. Rav Salant writes that refraining from attempting to rescue Lot would have created a *chilul Hashem* – a defamation of God, as he, who taught about God’s existence and His expectations of people, would be violating an explicit promise to his own kin. The test of this battle, then, was the test of integrity, of keeping his word even when this entailed great hardship and self-sacrifice.

Avraham’s going out to war to rescue his nephew shows us the importance of maintaining our integrity even when this is difficult and inconvenient. Just as Avraham undertook the drastic measure of waging war for the sake of fulfilling his pledge to Lot, we, too, must remain honest and keep the promises we make even under difficult circumstances and even when this entails great difficulty and sacrifice.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of God’s promise to Avraham that he would beget a large nation, despite his and Sara’s current inability to produce children. In response to Avraham’s lament, “But You have not given me offspring” (15:3), God brought him outdoors and instructed him, “Look, if you will, to the sky, and count the stars, if you can count them” (15:5). He then said, “Such shall be your offspring.”

The simple meaning of this verse is that God promised Avraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Having despaired from ever begetting children, God assured him that he would not only produce offspring, but would become the father of a nation as numerous as the stars.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, however, offers a different interpretation, suggesting that God draws Avraham’s attention not simply to the infinite number of stars, but to the nature of the heavenly sphere. Rav Hirsch writes:

On earth one no longer sees any *direct* creation of God. Everything that we see on earth is a product of something else already created, does not come directly from the Hand of God, but follows the natural laws of production. Within these earthly conditions where every effect comes from its given cause, Abraham is quite right, all promises are lacking to give rise for hopes of the blessing of children. Then God directs his sight up to the heavens. There things are different, what one sees there are bodies, creations which have been called into existence *directly* by God, in their pristine state just as they were when placed there by God at the creation… So that if somebody is to be made to visualize an existence brought about by the immediate direct power of God’s Almightiness, he can only be shown the stars… These…creations direct from the Creator are more numerous than those produced indirectly on the limited space of earth…

God showed Avraham not just the infinite number of stars – but that these innumerable creations are His direct handiwork, and did not evolve from the natural progression that characterizes our earthly sphere. Here on earth, we see products of the natural order, not direct creations of God. Rav Hirsch explains that God informs Avraham that his descendants, the Nation of Israel, will be “a second Creation,” produced directly from the Almighty, like the stars, outside the confines of our earthly existence.

Rav Hirsch applies this concept to explain a series of verses in Tehillim (147:2-5) which we recite each morning as part of the *Pesukei De-zimra* service: “The Lord builds Jerusalem; He gathers the exiles of Israel. He cures the brokenhearted and bandages their sorrow. He counts the number of the stars, giving names to them all. Our Lord is great and abundant in strength; His wisdom is incalculable.” The Psalmist here compares the redemption of Israel, the curing of our broken hearts, and the counting of the stars, stating that God accomplishes all these. Rav Hirsch explains:

However wretched and improbable the *nidchei Yisrael* [exiles of Israel] have become, they still depend directly and individually, like each star, on the word of God. Each individual Jew, however wretched his conditions may be, as long as he remains a Jew, he is under the personal *hashgacha peratit* [direct providence] “Who calleth him by name.”

Just as the birth of a son to Avraham and Sara occurred like the “stars,” through the direct action of God, circumventing, as it were, the natural order, so must we trust in God’s unlimited ability to cure the “brokenhearted.” We must never despair during times of hardship, and should instead remember that just as God “counts the number of the stars,” He is capable of directly intervening to help us and care for us in ways which we could not imagine, no matter how hopeless the situation appears.

Friday

Towards the end of Parashat Lekh-Lekha, we read of God’s command to Avraham to perform circumcision, which He introduces by instructing, “*Hit’haleikh lefanai*” – literally, “Walk before Me” (17:1). *Targum Onkelos* translates this to mean, “*Pelach kadamai*” – serve Me.”

Rashi cites Onkelos’ Aramaic translation – “*pelach kadamai*” – and then explains that this means, “*hidaveik ba-avodati*” – “adhere to My service.” Significantly, as some have noted, Rashi adds the element of “adherence” to Onkelos’ translation. Whereas Onkelos translates God’s command simply as “serve Me,” Rashi found it necessary to explain that this refers to “adhering” to God’s service.

Apparently, Rashi felt that by definition, being subservient to God means “adhering” to His service, remaining loyal and committed under all circumstances. If we serve God only when it is expedient or convenient, then we are not, in fact, serving Him. Service demands absolute and unconditional commitment, and thus Rashi explains “serve Me” to mean “adhere to My service” – because by definition, we serve God only by “adhering” to His service, by continuing to serve Him under all circumstances, even when it is not convenient, comfortable or easy.

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