**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham's involvement in a major regional war, in which he rescued the people and property of the city of Sedom. After the war, we read, the king of Sedom offered all the retrieved property to Avraham, but Avraham refused to take even a "thread" and "shoelace," as he was concerned that the king of Sedom might later take the credit for Avraham's wealth (14:23).

Many writers raised the question of why Avraham refused to accept the property of Sedom but unhesitatingly accepted lavish gifts given to him by Pharaoh during his brief sojourn in Egypt. As the Torah tells earlier in Parashat Lekh-Lekha, Avaham fled from drought-ravaged Canaan to Egypt, where Pharaoh abducted his wife, Sara, and then returned her the next morning after he and his household were punished by God. At the time Pharaoh returned Sara, he also gave Avraham a large amount of cattle, servants and money, instantly turning Avraham into a very wealthy man. Why did Avraham not voice the concern that Pharaoh would boast about having made Avraham rich, as Avraham did when Sedom offered him his city's property?

The Tolna Rebbe suggested an especially insightful answer, based on Rashi's comment (13:3) regarding Avraham's return to Canaan from Egypt. The Torah relates, "*Va-yeilekh le-masa'av*" (literally, "He went along his journeys"), and Rashi offers two interpretations of this phrase, the second of which is that Avraham repaid his debts upon his return to Canaan. He had left in a state of destitution, and now that he had obtained wealth in Egypt, he immediately proceeded to repay his debts. Once we realize that Avraham was in debt during the time he spent in Egypt, the Rebbe noted, we can easily understand why he did not refuse Pharaoh's offer. When a person owes money, he does not reserve the right to refuse offers of gifts as a measure of piety. If it was only Avraham's personal financial condition at stake, then he would have refused, just as he did when the king of Sedom offered him a huge fortune after Avraham was already wealthy. But as Avraham had unpaid debts while he was in Egypt, his decision affected not only himself, but also his creditors. He therefore had no right to refuse.

The message that emerges, as the Rebbe noted, is that one has no right to adhere to special measures of piety and stringency if this adversely impacts upon other people. Such measures are admirable when undertaken for the right reasons and under the right circumstances, but not if they come at other people's expense. Just as Avraham could not refuse a gift that could be used to repay his creditors, similarly, we may not take upon ourselves measures that extend beyond our strict obligations if this adversely affects the people around us.

Sunday

The Torah tells in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham's refusal to accept the offer made by the king of Sedom that Avraham keep the property of Sedom which he had rescued from the armies that had plundered the city. Avraham swore to the king that he would not take even a "thread or shoelace" from the retrieved property (14:23).

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (89a) finds it very significant that Avraham went so far as to refuse even these simple materials, stating that in reward for this declaration, Avraham's descendants received the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* – which involves a thread – and the *mitzva* of *tefillin*, which involves a strap (resembling a shoe strap).

An especially novel approach to explaining the Gemara's comment is taken by Rav Yehuda Yehoshua Falk Israelite (who served as Chief Rabbi of Chelsea, Massachusetts), in his [*Te'udat Yisrael* (pp. 43-44)](http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=39637&st=&pgnum=53). He suggests that the Gemara understood Avraham's proclamation as referring not to an ordinary thread and shoelace, but rather to special badges that were given to war heroes as signs of their success and heroism. Avraham announced to the king of Sedom that he was not interested in any of Sedom's property or in any recognition or honor. Even a simple badge or color to salute his extraordinary military achievement would not be accepted, in order to prevent the king of Sedom from later taking credit for Avraham's wealth and prestige.

On this basis, Rav Yehuda Yehoshua explains, we can perhaps understand the connection between Avraham's declaration and the *mitzvot* of *tzitzit* and *tefillin*. Both *tzitzit* and *tefillin* are worn on our bodies and serve as tangible signs of our loyalty and devotion to God. Rather than wear signs of honor and prestige given to us by other people, we wear and display these signs of our humble submission to God. Avraham was not interested in recognition; his goal and ambition was to live a noble and spiritual life devoted to the service of God. And thus instead of medals and badges celebrating military success, his descendants wear *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, symbols of our subservience to the Almighty.

If so, then this Talmudic passage reminds us to aspire not to fame and recognition, but to loyally serving God. We should be pursuing not public signs of success of achievement, but rather the status signified by *tzitzit* and *tefillin* – the status of faithful and committed *avdei Hashem*.

Monday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of God’s promise to Avraham that he would be receiving great reward, in response to which Avraham complained about the fact that he had not begotten any children, leaving his servant, Eliezer, as his only heir (15:2). In voicing this complaint, Avraham refers to Eliezer with the term “*damesek Eliezer*,” which likely means that Eliezer originated from the region of Damesek (Damascus), as *Targum Onkelos* explains. The Gemara (Yoma 28b), however, as Rashi cites, offers a Midrashic reading of the term “*damesek*,” interpreting it as a contraction of the words “*doleh u-mashkeh*” (literally, “draws and gives to drink”). This term, according to the Gemara’s reading, refers to Eliezer’s drawing Torah wisdom from his master, Avraham, and then sharing it with others.

Why is this quality of Eliezer relevant specifically in this context, when Avraham expresses his fear that he would not beget children and Eliezer would inherit his estate?

Rav Dov Weinberger, in his *Shemen Ha-tov*, answers by noting that in the Gemara’s description, all the work and action is attributed to Eliezer. The phrase “*doleh u-mashkeh*” implies that Eliezer made the effort to “draw” wisdom from Avraham, without requiring much effort and exertion on Avraham’s part. Possibly, then, this reading of the term “*damesek Eliezer*” underscores the difference between an heir like Eliezer, and children. Raising and educating a child entails a great amount of effort, initiative and active involvement on the parents’ part. The process of child-rearing cannot be described as “*doleh u-mashkeh*,” as one where the child simply draws knowledge and guidance from the parent. The parent must work hard to impact upon and educate the child; passivity is not an option.

This is the difference between teaching Eliezer and raising children, and this is the perspective with which the Gemara wanted us to view Avraham’s complaint. He was not content with students who were “*doleh u-mashkeh*,” who eagerly and readily took what he offered, accepted his teachings, followed his example, and then set out to have others do the same. He desired the great challenge of child-rearing, the awesome responsibility and task of passing on his beliefs, values and teachings to children. It is specifically because this process is so difficult and daunting that Avraham was so eager to embark upon it, understanding the value of hard work and that significant, long-lasting achievements – such as raising and educating children – are the ones that involve effort and toil, and not those which come easily.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the tensions that arose between Avraham and his nephew, Lot, who had joined him when he relocated in Canaan. Avraham decided that he and Lot needed to separate, and so he turned to Lot and offered him whichever region in Canaan he wished. Lot chose to settle in the region of Sedom, in the Jordan River Valley, while Avraham remained in the mountainous central region of Canaan.

Commenting on Avraham’s formulation of his offer (“If [you choose] the left, then I’ll go to the right” – 13:9), Rashi explains that Avraham here did not merely offer his nephew the choice of where to live, but also made him a guarantee: “Wherever you reside, I will not distance myself from you, and I will be there for you for protection and assistance.” This comment is likely based on the next chapter, which tells of the battle Avraham waged against four large armies to rescue the city of Sedom, whose population had been taken captive. Rashi understood that Avraham set out to rescue Lot in fulfillment of the pledge he had made at the time they separated to always be prepared to come to Lot’s assistance when necessary.

Avraham’s pledge becomes remarkable when we consider the circumstances of their separation. The feud that erupted between Avraham’s shepherds and Lot’s shepherds must have been particularly tense if Avraham decided the only solution was to move away from one another. Moreover, Rashi (13:7) explains that the feud revolved around the practice of Lot’s shepherds to allow their herds to graze in private property. It appears that Lot did not enforce appropriate ethical standards for his herdsmen, thus prompting Avraham to initiate the split. And, Rashi (13:10) cites the Midrash’s comment attributing Lot’s decision to settle in Sedom to his being attracted to their morally decadent culture. Despite the fact that Lot had, evidently, sunken to moral and ethical depths, to the point where Avraham found no alternative to separation, Avraham would not abandon him. He was committed to offering any form of assistance that was needed, at any time.

Another aspect of this story is noted by Rav Yosef Salant, in his *Be’er Yosef*, where he raises the question of why Avraham risked his life by waging a battle against four large empires. He answers, quite simply, that Avraham went to such lengths in order to avoid a *chilul Hashem* – bringing disgrace upon His faith. Once Avraham pledged to Lot, “I will not distance myself from you, and I will be there for you for protection and assistance,” he could not ignore Lot’s plight after falling captive with the rest of Sedom. If Avraham had failed to make an effort to rescue his nephew, he would have been looked upon as a fraud, as having deceived Lot into separating from him by making a commitment he never planned on keeping. Avraham’s decision thus shows us the extent to which we must go to avoid the perception of dishonesty, and to fulfill every commitment we make to others regardless of the sacrifice or difficulty entailed, so we do not even give the appearance of being deceitful.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of Avraham’s decision to separate from his nephew, Lot. The decision came in the wake of tensions that arose between the two men’s shepherds, following their sudden acquisition of large herds during their brief sojourn in Egypt. We read that their large quantities of property made it difficult for them to reside together, thus prompting Avraham to suggest to Lot that they split (13:13:5-12).

Several interesting contrasting parallels exist between this story and one which occurred many centuries later – the story of Rut and Naomi, told in *Megilat Rut* (1). Just as Avraham proposed to his family member who had accompanied him that they should separate, Naomi suggested that Rut return home rather than remain with her. Both incidents occurred after the parties involved had relocated to escape harsh drought conditions in *Eretz Yisrael*. Of course, these parallels serve to underscore the stark differences between the two accounts. Most obviously, Lot immediately agreed to Avraham’s proposal, whereas Rut insisted on remaining with Naomi, despite her entreaties that Rut return. Avraham’s proposal resulted from the two parties’ abundance of wealth, which made it difficult for them to remain together, whereas Naomi found herself in a state of destitution, and therefore urged Rut to return to the comforts of her family’s home rather than remain with an impoverished widow. Additionally, Avraham urged Lot to separate because they were relatives and therefore should avoid quarreling (“*ki anashim achim anachnu*” – 13:8), while Naomi told Rut to leave specifically because there was no chance of Rut joining her family, as she was too old to bear a son (Rut 1:12-13).

What might be the significance of these parallels and points of contrast?

These two accounts, when examined together, present Lot and his descendant, Rut, as two opposite figures: Lot could have been expected to insist on remaining with his uncle, yet chose to leave, while Rut had every reason to leave Naomi, but insisted on remaining with her. Lot and Avraham lived comfortably, and God had promised Avraham a bright and glorious future. We might assume that if Lot had wanted to remain with his saintly uncle, he could have found a way to resolve the conflicts, such as by ordering his shepherds to yield to Avraham’s wishes, yet he immediately accepted Avraham’s suggestion. *Chazal*, as Rashi (13:11) cites, were critical of Lot’s decision, which they understood as a rejection of Avraham’s values in favor of the luxurious, hedonistic lifestyle of Sedom. Rut, of course, did just the opposite. According to the Gemara (Sanhedrin 105b), Rut belonged to the royal family of Moav. Rut faced the option of living in luxury or living in deprivation, and she chose the latter out of a sense of fealty to her beloved mother-in-law and to God. While Lot sacrificed the spiritual benefits of living with Avraham in favor of the material benefits of Sedom, Rut sacrificed the material benefits of Moav in favor of the spiritual benefits of remaining with Naomi.

Indeed, Kabbalistic tradition associates these two figures on a mystical level. Rav Chaim Vital (in *Sha’ar Ha-gilgulim*) identifies Rut as the reincarnation of Lot’s older daughter, whose son, Moav, was Rut’s ancestor and the founder of the nation of Moav. In Kabbalistic terms, Rut achieved the *tikkun* – “rectification” – of Lot’s soul. Lot made the mistake of sacrificing spiritual gain for material indulgence, and his mistake was reversed by Rut’s sacrificing financial stability to join *Am Yisrael*.

These two stories, then, teach us the importance of maintaining proper priorities, that we must be prepared to compromise our level of material comfort for the sake of spiritual achievement. While we are not expected to subject ourselves to the level of destitution endured by Rut when she joined Naomi, her inspiring example should motivate us to make *avodat Hashem* our highest priority and, when necessary, make sacrifices for the sake of spiritual excellence. Certainly, we must avoid the mistake made by Lot, of prioritizing material luxury over the benefits of living with and learning from the example of Avraham Avinu.

THURSDAY

In the final section of Parashat Lekh-Lekha, God issues to Avraham the command of *berit mila*, instructing him and his descendants to remove “*besar orlatekhem*” (17:11), which is commonly translated as, “the flesh of your foreskin.”

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his [*Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14121&st=&pgnum=93), discusses this phrase and the precise meaning of the words “*besar*” and “*orla*,” offering two possible readings. First, he suggests that the word “*basar*” (“flesh”) is used here as a euphemistic reference to the male reproductive organ, citing as a proof-text the phrase “*zav mi-besaro*” used in Sefer Vayikra (15:2) to refer to discharge from the male organ. The word “*orla*” means “covering,” as in the term “*orlat levavkhem*” (Devarim 10:15), which metaphorically describes the “covering” over our hearts which we need to eliminate. According to this approach, Rav Mecklenberg writes, the phrase should actually be written as “*orlat besarkhem*” – the skin covering the male organ – but the Torah reversed the two words as a kind of poetic license. (Rav Mecklenberg notes other examples of instances where the Torah reverses the sequence of words in a two-word phrase.)

Alternatively, Rav Mecklenberg writes, the word “*basar*” can be understood to mean “skin.” Although this word generally refers to flesh, Rav Mecklenberg suggests that since human beings are not skinned after death as slaughtered animals are, and the skin is thus never removed from the flesh, the word for “flesh” can be used in reference to “skin,” as well. According to this approach, he writes, the term “*besar orlatekhem*” should be read as “*besarkhem he-arel*” – “your unremoved skin,” referring to a piece of skin that ought to be removed but is still on the flesh.

Rav Mecklenberg then creatively proposes that these different readings of “*besar orlatekhem*” underlie the debate in Masekhet Yevamot (71b) as to the source of the obligation of *peri’a* – removing the thin layer of skin underneath the foreskin. While it is clear that *peri’a* is strictly required as part of the obligation of *berit mila*, the *Amora’im* debate the question of whether this requirement was included in the command of *berit mila* given to Avraham, or was issued later to Avraham’s descendants. This question, Rav Mecklenberg suggests, might hinge on the precise meaning of God’s command to Avraham to remove “*besar orlatekhem*.” According to the second approach noted above, the skin is referred to with the word “*basar*,” which literally means “flesh.” If so, then it stands to reason that the command given to Avraham includes the removal of even the thin layer of skin underneath the foreskin, which is firmly attached to the flesh. According to this reading, it might be suggested that the Torah specifically chose to refer to the skin with the term “*basar*” to indicate that one must remove even this layer, which appears as part of the flesh. According to the first approach, however, Avraham was commanded only to remove the “*orla*” – the covering of the male organ, which does not necessarily include the thin layer that lies underneath the foreskin. Therefore, the two views cited by the Gemara could perhaps depend on how one interprets the phrase “*besar orlatekhem*.”

Friday

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 39) tells that Avraham traveled about in his home country of Aram, he saw people “going about recklessly, eating and drinking.” He then uttered a prayer that he should not have any portion of that land. Later, upon reaching the border of Canaan, he saw people “engaged in weeding at the time of weeding, and in hoeing at the time of hoeing.” He then prayed for a share of that land, whereupon God promised that the entirety of Canaan is being given to him and his descendants. The Midrash here teaches that Avraham was impressed by the sense of responsibility and work ethic displayed by the people of Canaan, which contrasted sharply with the carefree and mindless lifestyle of the people of Aram.

On the basis of this Midrash, Rav Yehuda Altusky ([*Hegyonei Yehudi*, vol. 5, p. 146](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2349&st=&pgnum=140&hilite=)) suggested an explanation for Rashi’s famous comments later, in Parashat Vayera (18:4), describing the angels who visited Avraham’s tent. Citing the Midrash, Rashi writes that the angels disguised themselves as members of a tribe that “bow to the dust on their feet,” thus prompting Avraham to offer them water to rinse their feet. Many have raised the question of what exactly it means to worship “dust on their feet.” Rav Altusky suggested reading this description allegorically, as referring to overreliance on agriculture and shepherding. The dust accumulated on the people’s feet symbolized their hard work and long hours in the fields or with the herds. As Avraham noted, the people of Canaan admirably approached their pursuits with responsibility and seriousness. Apparently, however, they went too far, according too much importance to their work, to the point where they could be described as “bowing” to their work rather than to the Almighty. Rav Altusky adds that this might be at least part of the reason why Avraham so warmly welcomed the three wayfarers. While he obviously objected to their “worship” of the “dust on their feet,” he admired and respected their work ethic.

If so, then these two Midrashic passages remind us of the need to admire and respect the positive qualities of even those with views and practices to which we strongly object. Avraham mistook these three angels for idolaters, yet this did not blind him to their virtues which deserve respect. Even as we reject and oppose ideas and actions, we must still identify the admirable characteristics that we can appreciate and seek to emulate.

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