**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

In the final section of Parashat Lekh-Lekha, God issues to Avraham the command of *berit mila*, whereupon Avraham immediately proceeds to circumcise himself, his son, and his male servants. Interestingly, before telling of Avraham’s prompt fulfillment of God’s command, the Torah writes, “He [God] finished speaking with him, and God rose from upon Avraham” (17:22). The Torah found it necessary to emphasize that the prophecy ended, and God “rose from upon Avraham.”

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in *Kedushat Levi*, suggests that the Torah added this brief comment to underscore the fact that Avraham needed to muster deep resolve in order to fulfill this command. When God’s presence is felt, and especially during a prophetic encounter, it is not all that difficult to obey His word, no matter what is entailed. Performing circumcision at an advanced age was assuredly difficult, but this would not have posed such a difficult challenge if Avraham’s prophetic experience had continued, and he still tangibly sensed God’s presence. In Rav Levi Yitzchak’s words, the evil inclination cannot affect a person when the divine presence rests upon him. The Torah therefore emphasizes that Avraham underwent this painful procedure after the prophetic encounter had ended, after God’s presence left him. By the time he took the knife to perform the *berit mila*, he was no longer in God’s direct presence, and was thus subject to the many emotional obstacles that so often present themselves when we set out to do the right thing.

Rav Levi Yitzchak’s insight reminds us that inspiration is fleeting and thus an unreliable source of strength. While there are times when we feel inspired and energized, when we would never seriously contemplate wrongdoing, these periods are temporary, and the inspiration fades very quickly. We cannot expect to be always driven by an emotional charge to serve God and fulfill our religious duties. There is no avoiding struggle, hard work and determination in our efforts to serve the Almighty. Even after receiving prophecy, Avraham had to muster strength and resolve to fulfill God’s command. Certainly, then, we must be prepared to work and struggle with ourselves, and must never expect or rely on emotional fervor to keep us going.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of Avraham’s marriage to Hagar, Sara’s maidservant, a union initiated by Sara who was unable to conceive and thus hoped to have children through Hagar. Once Hagar conceived, we read, she began conducting herself as an equal to Sara, whereupon Sara became angry with Avraham: “My wrath is upon you; I placed my maidservant in your bosom, and when she saw that she conceived, she belittled me. The Lord shall judge between us” (16:5).

Seforno explains that Sara was angry at Avraham for failing to reprimand Hagar for her disrespect towards Sara. Rashi, citing the Midrash, also offers this explanation, but in addition, he claims that Sara blamed Avraham for praying only that he should have children, and not that Sara, too, should be blessed with a child. A different approach is taken by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who writes that Hagar’s condescension towards Sara must have – at least in Sara’s mind – resulted from Avraham’s conduct. As it was Sara herself who allowed Hagar to marry Avraham for the expressed purpose of begetting children whom Sara would raise as her own, it must be that Avraham’s conduct that led Hagar to view herself as superior. Hagar was certainly aware of her subordinate status, and if she now acted as an equal or as Sara’s superior, this must have resulted from the way Avraham acted.

Regardless, the Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (16b) proves from this incident that “whoever casts judgment upon his fellow is punished first.” Sara, in her frustration, asked God to punish Avraham – “The Lord shall judge between us” – and in the end, as the Gemara notes, Sara died before Avraham. The Gemara thus asserts that if a person becomes angry at his fellow and appeals to God to punish him, the person who makes this request is punished first.

A number of writers noted that the Gemara speaks of such a person as being punished “first,” indicating that the other individual will likewise endure divine retribution. And so in Avraham and Sara’s case, this means that Avraham must have likewise been punished for his improper conduct in this episode, even if Sara, who called for divine justice, was punished first.

Different explanations have been given for how Avraham was punished (some claim that Avraham, like Sara, was to have lived longer), but regardless, it is noteworthy that the Gemara criticizes Sara for “casting judgment” upon her husband even though he indeed acted wrongly. The fact that Sara had a valid grievance did not excuse her angry reaction. Wishing evil upon one’s fellow is not an acceptable response to frustration. The Gemara teaches us to conduct ourselves humbly and tolerantly among our family members and peers, recognizing the fact that mistakes are going to be made and forgiveness is, in the vast majority of situations, the proper response.

Monday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham’s successful attack on the forces of the four kings who had captured his nephew, Lot, along with the rest of the people of Sedom. On his triumphant return from battle, the king of Sedom offered Avraham to keep all the property which had retrieved from the marauders. Avraham replied, “I have lifted my hand to the Supreme God…that I will not take anything of yours – even a thread or shoestring…” (14:22-23).

The phrase, “*harimoti yadi*” (“I have lifted my hand”) in this verse is commonly understood as a reference to an oath, Avraham’s formally swearing that he would never accept any of the property of Sedom. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch noted, however, that whereas “hand raising” is indeed associated with oaths, Avraham’s formulation here differs from the standard wording used in reference to swearing. Usually, an oath is referred to with the verb *n.s.a.*, whereas here Avraham says, “*harimoti*,” not “*nasati*.” In light of this distinction, Rav Hirsch considers a different reading of this verse. He observes that the term *harimoti* is related to the word *teruma*, which refers to a portion of something that is removed from the other portions and designated for a special purpose (such as a donation to a *kohen*). Thus, unlike other verbs that mean “raise,” the verb *le-harim* has the particular connotation of setting apart. It means not “raise,” but “separate”; it refers to “raising” not in the sense of elevation, but rather in the sense of distinction and special designation.

Rav Hirsch thus suggests that Avraham’s comment to the king of Sedom could be understood to mean as follows:

When I went away I dedicated my hand to God, no self-interested motives directed me, but rather I withdrew my hand from all other purposes that are lower than God, and dedicated it solely to God, so that from all my victory I may take nothing for any other purpose, nothing for myself.

Avraham declared that he diverted his “hand” away from everything else besides his dedication to the Almighty. When he set out for war, he pledged that his efforts would be exclusively devoted to the lofty purpose of rescuing his kin and defeating evil, and not for any personal gain. Therefore, he could not allow himself to accept the wealth of Sedom which he had retrieved.

Rav Hirsch’s insight challenges us to ask the uncomfortable question of how many of our virtuous acts are driven by sincere, altruistic motives, as opposed to less holy aspirations. Can we honestly avow, as Avraham did, “*Harimoti yadi le-Kel Elyon*” – that we engage in *mitzvot* purely out of a desire to serve our Creator, and not to derive personal benefit? We must learn from our patriarch to carefully examine our motives underlying even the meaningful pursuits in which we engage, to ensure that they are pure and not tainted by self-serving interests.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of how Sara “oppressed” her maidservant, Hagar, in response to Hagar’s disdainful conduct towards her after she conceived. Hagar fled Avraham and Sara’s home, and later an angel appeared to her and instructed her to return. When the angel first spoke to Hagar, it said, “Hagar, Sara’s maidservant, where are you coming from, and where are you going?” Hagar replied, “I am fleeing from my mistress, Sarai” (16:8).

The Gemara, in Masekhet Bava Kama (92b), takes note of the fact that the angel referred to Hagar as “*shifchat Sarai*” (“Sarai’s maidservant”) and she then affirmed that she was fleeing from “*Sarai gevirti*” – “my mistress, Sarai.” The angel emphasized Hagar’s status as a maidservant, and she acknowledged that this was indeed her position. The Gemara sees this exchange as a Biblical source for the adage, “If your fellow calls you a ‘donkey,’ bring a saddle onto your back.” Meaning, if somebody calls us by a derogatory title, we should admit to it, rather than resent it.

It should be noted that in the example brought by the Gemara – the exchange between Hagar and the angel – the derogatory title was accurate; Hagar was, in fact, Sara’s maidservant. Necessarily, then, when the Gemara speaks of one whose fellow calls him a “donkey,” it refers to a case of an insult that is accurate, albeit offensive and hurtful. The Gemara does not teach us to accept a derogatory insult that is untrue; instead, it urges us to take accurate insults to heart, and to accept the truth even when it is painful, just as Hagar humbly and honestly acknowledged that she was, indeed, Sara’s maidservant.

When somebody callously points out a fault or offers harsh criticism, our instinctive reaction is to defend ourselves and find a way to affirm our innocence or deny the accusation. The Gemara here urges us to follow Hagar’s example of “*mipenei Sarai gevirti*” – to humbly acknowledge an accurate charge or piece of criticism. Even if the person speaks to us in an appropriate, hurtful manner, if what he says is true, it is in our best interest to take the words to heart. We cannot grow without enduring the pain of recognizing our faults and deficiencies. And thus rather than trying to avoid this pain by denying criticism, we should, as difficult as it is, embrace it, acknowledge the truth, and work to improve ourselves.

Wednesday

In the beginning of Parashat Lekh-Lekha, we read of God’s command to Avraham to leave his parents’ home and journey “to a land that I will show you.” Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 39), comments that God did not initially inform Avraham where he was going, “in order to give him reward for each step.” Not knowing his destination made Avraham’s journey more difficult, and hence the reward for obeying God’s command was greater. The Midrash is teaching us that embarking on a challenging endeavor is more difficult when we do not know precisely how or when the process will be completed, and thus in the case of a *mitzva*, our reward is greater when we do not know ahead of time when the process will end.

We can perhaps gain deeper insight into the Midrash’s comment in light of *Chazal*’s interpretation of the command in Sefer Vayikra (25:43), “*Lo tirdeh bo be-ferekh*” – not to overwork one’s servant. One of the forms of labor proscribed by this command, as explained in *Torat Kohanim*, is to impose upon one’s servant a task without informing him of its duration. The example given is, “Dig under the vine until I return” – where the servant does not know for how long he will have to dig. Issuing such a command is cruel and unjust, because – perhaps among other reasons – it is not geared toward a particular result. Telling a worker to produce a certain outcome is reasonable; telling a worker to work indefinitely, without specifying an objective, is oppression. The goal, at least as it appears, is simply to force the servant to work, and not to provide a valuable service for the master, and such a command is thus regarded as cruelty.

When it comes to our service to the Almighty, however, this is not the case. God does not need us to “achieve” anything. Anything we can do, He can do infinitely better. In our relationship to God, then, the goal is, indeed, for us to work. The practical end result is not nearly as vital as the fact that we are engaged in “work” commanded to us by the Almighty. This in itself is a great privilege and the fulfillment of our purpose in the world, irrespective of the practical outcome. And thus while imposing unlimited labor upon a worker is improper, we are privileged to be able to “work” unlimitedly in our service of God.

The Midrash here reminds us never to despair if we do not see the practical results of our efforts, if we do not see the “end” of our hard work. Each and every step is inherently valuable, for the process in this case is an end unto itself, and not merely a means to achieving a specific result.

Thursday

The Rambam, in the beginning of Hilkhot Avoda Zara, describes how Avraham, who was born and raised in a pagan world, arrived at monotheistic belief and began debating the people of his time and preaching the truth of this belief. We make poetic mention of Avraham’s efforts to disseminate the truth of monotheism in the *tefilat geshem* prayer on Shemini Atzeret, when we beseech God to remember “the patriarch who was drawn after You like water,” adding, “*derashto be-zar’o al kol mayim*” – “You sought him out when he planted along all waters.” The image of Avraham “planting” likely refers to his effort to “sow” the belief in God among the people of his time. These efforts are what prompted God to “seek him out” – to forge a special relationship with him which has continued ever since through his descendants.

Rabbi Simon Dolgin ([“The Enduring Seed”](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=12870&st=&pgnum=120)) finds it significant that the hymnist emphasizes Avraham’s planting “*al* ***kol*** *mayim*” – “along **all** waters.” The point we are making in this prayer is that Avraham “sowed” the seeds of faith everywhere, in every location he could. Rabbi Dolgin writes:

We note that the Lord sought him out because he planted his seed on all waters. It made no difference to Abraham where it was, a rivulet or a lake, a river or a sea, he planted his seed. Whether he was in the land of his father, Terach, in the Euphrates land, or in the strange country of Canaan, whether he stood before Pharaoh or Abimelech, he continued to sow his seed of faith in One G-d. Whether the climate was moderate or torrid, desert or oasis, Abraham planted the seeds of monotheism, faith in one G-d, a father of justice and mercy. Before all oncomers, he represented his noble ideal.

Understanding the vital importance of his campaign, Avraham pursued and seized every opportunity to spread his word. It did not matter whether he was with a large group of influential figures or with a lone, simple peasant; he worked to “sow” his “seeds” along every bit of “water” – wherever he saw the possibility of the seed’s growth and development.

Rabbi Dolgin proceeds to observe how this legacy of “*al kol mayim*” has been carried by Avraham’s progeny:

The greatest tribute to Abraham’s dedication is the fruit that his seed has borne, a people that still invokes his name in petitioning the Heavenly Father for His blessing, a people that has continued to sow the seeds of its faith and way of life, of its Torah and the duties of its heart in all climes and on all bodies of water – at times in temperate lands where Jews were welcome, at times in desert lands where Jews were rejected. The test of the effectiveness of Abraham's faithful sowing is the blossoming faith of his seed into an eternal people which still serves the God who sought him out.

We perpetuate this timeless legacy by following Avraham’s example of steadfast determination, by working tirelessly to “sow” his spiritual “seeds” at all times and under all circumstances. Like our patriarch, our commitment to the Almighty must be manifest “*al kol mayim*,” under all conditions, even in periods of hardship and challenge.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of how Sara had Avraham marry her maidservant, Hagar, in order for her to have children through Hagar, and how Hagar began acting disrespectfully towards Sara upon conceiving. As Sara was childless, Hagar viewed her pregnancy as heralding her status of superiority in the home. In response, Sara expressed anger to Avraham: “Sara said to Avraham: My fury is upon you; I placed my maidservant in your bosom, and when she saw she was pregnant, she belittled me” (16:5).

Rashi, commenting on the words, “*Chamasi alekha*” (“My fury is upon you”), explains, based on the Midrash, that Sara was telling Avraham, “*Devarekha ata chomeis mimeni*” – “You are robbing your words from me.” Sara was angry because Avraham should have intervened to defend her honor. By failing to do so, Avraham was “robbing his words,” keeping to himself the words that ought to have been clearly spoken.

Rashi’s interpretation of the word “*chamas*” in this context is striking. He builds upon the common usage of this term as a reference to theft, and applies this usage to a situation where one withheld something that should have been shared. Avraham is said to have “robbed” Sara in the sense that he did not speak the words that needed to be said, and failed to intervene when his intervention was vitally needed. Rashi’s interpretation of “*chamasi alekha*” teaches us that failing to help when help is needed and we are able to provide it constitutes a form of “*chamas*” – “theft.” Efforts that could be made to help others need to be made. If we have the time and resources to assist people in their time of need, and we fail to do so, then we are guilty of a form of “theft,” withholding for ourselves assets that should be used to help others. The fact that Avraham is described as “robbing” his wife by failing to provide the assistance and support she needed demonstrates the need to feel responsible and obliged to provide needed help when we are capable of doing so.