**SALT – PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Lekh-Lekha begins with God’s famous command to Avraham, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home, to the land which I will shall you.” Avraham was told to leave his homeland and settle in the land that he would be shown – which turned out, of course, to be the Land of Israel which God later promised to give to his descendants for all time.

A number of commentators, including the Ramban and the Radak, explain that God needed to emphasize, “from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home” because it is very difficult for a person to leave his homeland and his family, and move to a foreign country. God understood that this command posed a considerable challenge, and so He emphasized that Avraham was to relocate in Canaan despite the hardship entailed.

Rav Naftali of Ropshitz (*Zera Kodesh*) adds that the phrase “from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home” might also have served an additional function. Avraham may have felt unworthy of the mission to which he was now being assigned, and the stature to which he was now being elevated, by virtue of his past. Having grown among and raised by idol-worshippers, Avraham might have felt hesitant about responding to God’s call, recognizing his humble beginnings and pagan background. God therefore urged Avraham to “go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s home,” to let go of his past, not to allow his humble beginnings to discourage him.

While humility is, of course, a critically important virtue, we must ensure that our honest awareness of our failings and flaws serve to motivate and drive us, and do not discourage us. In order to grow and achieve, we need to “go forth” from our past mistakes, to leave them behind us and trust in our ability to achieve greatness despite our humble beginnings.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sukka (49b) draws a curious association between Avraham Avinu and the *mitzva* of *aliya le-regel* – the pilgrimage to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* on the occasions of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Citing the verse in Shir Hashirim (7:2), “How beautiful are your steps in shoes, daughter of the ‘*nadiv*’ [nobleman],” the Gemara explains that God here praises the “footsteps” of *Benei Yisrael*, and exclaims, “How beautiful are Israel’s footsteps at the time when they make their pilgrimage.” *Benei Yisrael* are called here “*bat nadiv*,” the Gemara adds, as a reference to Avraham, who was given the title “*nadiv*.” The Gemara cites a verse in Tehillim (47:10) which associates Avraham with the word “*nadiv*” (“***Nedivei*** *amim ne’esafu, am Elokei* ***Avraham***”).

Why are *Benei Yisrael* referred to as “the daughter of Avraham” specifically in the context of the *mitzva* of *aliya le-regel*? What is the connection between Avraham and the festival pilgrimage to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*?

Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in his *Arukh La-ner* commentary, explains that *Benei Yisrael*’s pilgrimage to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* parallels Avraham’s journey from his homeland to Canaan. God assigned Avraham his mission in order to spread the belief in a single deity, to publicize God throughout the world. The *Arukh La-ner* writes that *aliya le-regel*, too, served this purpose, as the entire nation assembled in Jerusalem to bring sacrifices and celebrate their relationship with God, creating a public spectacle that brought glory to God. Thus, the nation’s trek to Jerusalem for *aliya le-regel* parallels Avraham’s trek to the Land of Israel to publicize the Name of God.

Extending this parallel one step further, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the command of “*lekh lekha*,” that Avraham leave his homeland, is listed as one of the ten “tests” given to Avraham and which he withstood (see commentaries to Avot 5:3). Leaving one’s homeland and familiar environment to begin a new chapter poses a difficult challenge. *Aliya le-regel*, too, at least symbolically, entails this sort of challenge, requiring that we leave the comfort of our homes and familiar routines for the purpose of serving God and bringing Him glory. It means putting aside everything else we would otherwise want to do for the sake of God. The call of “*lekh lekha*” commands us to be prepared to leave the comfort of familiarity and routine, to exert effort, to inconvenience ourselves and go through the trouble of “journeying” to the “*Beit Ha-mikdash*,” to take part of our nation’s mission to bring glory to the Creator. Just as Avraham was called upon to leave his homeland, and in the times of the *Mikdash* we were required three times a year to leave our homes and journey to the *Mikdash*, so must we be ready and willing to accept the challenge of leaving our everyday routines and comforts for the sake of God.

Monday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of Avraham’s involvement in a major war which was waged in Canaan. Upon hearing that the population of the city of Sedom – where his nephew lived – was taken captive, Avraham mobilized a small battalion and miraculously defeated the large armies who had conquered Sedom. Returning from battle, he was greeted with a festive celebration by Malki-Tzedek, king of the city of Shaleim, identified by several commentators (Ibn Ezra, Radak, Ramban) as Jerusalem. The Torah relates that Malki-Tzedek met Avraham in a place called *Eimek Ha-melekh* – “Valley of the King.”

Rashi brings two explanations for what kind of place this was. Onkelos translates “*Eimek Ha-melekh*” as “*Beit Reisa De-malka*,” which Rashi understood to mean a place “set aside for the king to enjoy himself there.” According to this interpretation, *Eimek Ha-melekh* was a recreational site, a place where the king – and, presumably, his men – would play games and enjoy amusement. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:5), however, as Rashi proceeds to cite, comments that this site was called “Valley of the King” because “all the nations…crowned Avraham as a prince of God and officer over them.” According to the Midrash, the “king” referred to in the expression “*Eimek Ha-melekh*” is not the king of Shaleim, but rather Avraham, who on that occasion, after his miraculous military victory over four powerful allied armies, was crowned as “king” over the region, as he was newly recognized as “prince of God.”

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Barzel, in his *Iyunei Rashi*, notes that these two views cited by Rashi present two diametrically opposite perspectives on this site where Malki-Tzedek met Avraham. One view depicts this site as a place of childish entertainment and amusement, whereas the other sees it as the place where an event of monumental spiritual significance occurred, when all the different tribes in the region assembled to formally name Avraham as their leader, proclaiming their acceptance of the monotheistic belief he preached and represented. Rather than treat these two explanations as reflecting opposite perspectives, Rav Barzel boldly proposes that they instead refer to two different stages. Initially, *Eimek Ha-melekh* was the place where the king and his men would enjoy games and merrymaking, but in reaction to Avraham’s miraculous defeat of the four armies that had captured the people of Sedom, the people assembled in *Eimek Ha-melekh* to reverently “crown” Avraham as their leader and accept the belief in one God. In essence, Rav Barzel suggests, Rashi here speaks of the transformation of *Eimek Ha-melekh* from a site of frivolous, wasteful activities into the site of a profound religious awakening.

Rav Barzel cites in this context the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Megilla (6a) that the “theaters and circuses of Edom” will one day be used by “the officers of Judea” for public Torah study. The Gemara foresees the time when large edifices built for amusement will be used for disseminating Torah to the public, symbolizing the process of perfecting the world which will unfold during the Messianic era. A similar process occurred in Avraham’s time, as sites of vain, meaningless pursuits were used as sites for proclaiming the truth about God.

If the world’s final redemption includes the transformation of sites of amusement to sites of spiritual engagement, then we may infer that our personal “redemption,” too, must include this element. As part of our ongoing process of growth, we are to strive to limit the amount of time and resources we wastefully spend on vain, valueless pursuits. We must endeavor to transform our “*Eimek Ha-melekh*” of amusement into the “*Eimek Ha-melekh*” of meaningful, productive activity. While we of course all require time for relaxation and recreation, we must avoid the tendency to waste our valuable time on vanity, and instead seek to take full advantage of the limited amount of time we are given here on earth.

Tuesday

Parashat Lekh-Lekha begins with God’s command to Avraham to leave his homeland and settle in Canaan. The Torah relates that when Avraham arrived in Canaan, “the Canaanites were then in the land” (12:6). Later, however, we read that after a drought struck Canaan, forcing Avraham to temporarily reside in Egypt, he returned to Canaan and found that “the Canaanites and the Prizites were then in the land” (13:7). Whereas the Torah first tells of the land being inhabited by Canaanites, we now discover that there were also Prizites.

Rav Yehuda Henkin (*Mahalkhim Ba-mikra*, pp. 55-57) suggested explaining that Avraham’s immigration to Canaan occurred at a time when many tribes were migrating and relocating. This flurry of migration saw the arrival of the Prizi tribe in Canaan during the brief period which Avraham spent in Egypt.

Rav Henkin applied this theory to explain the background to the conflict of which we read later in Parashat Lekh-Lekha, between the five cities of the Jordan River Valley, and four large Mesopotamian kingdoms. The Torah (14:4) tells that the cities were subservient to these kingdoms for twelve years, and then rebelled, in response to which the armies of the four kingdoms came to wage war, and captured the cities. We are left wondering why and how these cities in the region of the Jordan River came under the governance of these distant kingdoms. Rav Henkin speculates that the valley was populated by migrants from Mesopotamia, who sought to enjoy the agricultural benefits of the region (which the Torah explicitly describes: “it was all irrigated, like the Garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt” – 13:10). They arrived as citizens of the Mesopotamian kingdoms, and were thus subservient to those kingdoms and obligated to pay taxes, until they demanded their independence. The four kingdoms responded by waging a fierce war against the five cities and capturing the region.

The significance of this point, Rav Henkin observes, lies in the difference between Avraham’s migration and those of the other peoples. The other migrants relocated for purely economic purposes, or to exert their power and dominion. In the case of the Jordan River Valley – Sedom and its surrounding cities – the migrants established a decadent, heartless society, focused exclusively on their own wealth and indulgence, ignoring the plight of the underprivileged. As people were migrating to enrich themselves or to impose their rule over others, God commanded Avraham to migrate for a much different purpose – to establish a nation that would represent God and morality. At a time when clans and tribes were migrating to build societies characterized by decadence and cruelty, God appeared to Avraham and instructed him to migrate to build a society characterized by kindness, sensitivity and holiness, setting an example for the rest of mankind to follow.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Lekh-Lekha of the military operation which Avraham launched – and which was miraculously successful – against the four kingdoms who had captured the people and property of the city of Sedom. Avraham’s nephew, Lot, who had previously settled in Sedom, was among the captives, and as soon as Avraham heard of what happened, he mobilized a small battalion and pursued the four armies, defeating them and restoring all the people and property of Sedom.

Upon his triumphant return from battle, Avraham was greeted by the king of Sedom, who offered Avraham all the retrieved property, in exchange for returning the rescued captives so they could again live under the king’s rule. Avraham adamantly refused, announcing, “From a thread to a shoelace – I shall not take anything of yours, so you shall not say: I enriched Avraham” (14:23).

Many commentators raised the question of why Avraham refused to accept the property of Sedom, but earlier received lavish gifts from Pharaoh. During Avraham and Sarah’s brief sojourn in Egypt, they posed as siblings, and when Sarah was taken to the palace as a wife for Pharaoh, Avraham was showered with gifts, which he did not refuse (12:16). Why did Avraham accept these gifts, but turn down the offer made by the king of Sedom?

Rav Yehuda Henkin (*Mahalkhim Ba-mikra*, pp. 64-65) suggests an answer by speculating about the diplomatic underpinnings of the king’s offer. Although the four kingdoms who had captured the people and property of Sedom were defeated by Avraham, there was no guarantee that they would not launch another offensive. The king of Sedom wanted to “buy” Avraham’s assurance that he would come to assist him in the future if necessary. Avraham, wisely, did not want to make a future commitment to Sedom. On this occasion, he decided to intervene on behalf of his nephew’s city, but he felt it unwise to forge a formal alliance that would obligate him in the future. He therefore declined the offer, explaining, “so you shall not say: I enriched Avraham” – that he did not want to obligate himself to assist the king in the future in exchange for the enormous fortune he was given.

Rav Henkin concludes, “Avraham is revealed before our eyes as not only an innocent *tzadik* [righteous person] who performs kindness, but also as someone who is careful and realistic, who foresees the future.” Avraham’s greatness lay not only in his loving kindness and compassion, but also in his ability to balance his idealism with realism, to be generous while also exercising prudence and carefully assessing future risks.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of Sara’s unusual decision to have her maidservant, Hagar, marry Avraham in order to produce children. Seeing that she had been unable to conceive after many years of marriage to Avraham, Sara asked Avraham to take Hagar as his second wife, and the offspring would be, in a sense, considered hers.

The Ramban (16:2) observes a number of nuances in the text regarding this incident. First, the Torah writes that “Sarai, Avram’s wife” gave Hagar to Avraham as a wife. Although we are obviously well aware that Sarai was Avraham’s wife, the Torah found it necessary to emphasize this point in telling of Avraham’s marriage to Hagar. The Ramban explains that this was mentioned “to allude that Sara did not despair from Avram, and did not distance herself from being alongside him, for she was his wife and he was her husband.” The Torah wanted to clarify that Sara was not leaving Avraham to give way for Hagar, but rather remained as Avraham’s wife even as he now married a second woman. Secondly, the Ramban notes, the Torah emphasizes that Sara gave Hagar “*lo le-isha*” – “to him as a wife.” She had Hagar marry Avraham not as a concubine, but rather as a full-fledged wife alongside her, even though Hagar had been her maidservant. The Ramban concludes, “All this [reflects] Sara’s ethics and the respect with which she treated her husband.” The Torah emphasized this to highlight Sara’s moral character, how her loyalty to Avraham led her to remain his wife even alongside Hagar, and how she insisted on “promoting” Hagar to be Avraham’s wife, rather than have Avraham take her as merely a concubine.

This remark of the Ramban is especially noteworthy in light of his more famous comments (16:6) charging that Sara acted improperly later in this story. After Hagar conceived, she began treating Sara disrespectfully, as she now saw herself as the primary wife. Sara responded by “oppressing” Hagar (“*Va-te’aneha Sara*” – 16:6), to the point where Hagar fled from the home. The Ramban writes, “Our matriarch sinned through this ‘oppression’,” and he boldly asserts that the pain that the descendants of Hagar’s son, Yishmael, would inflict upon *Am Yisrael* later in history is God’s punishment for this sin. Significantly, the Ramban expresses admiration for Sara’s selflessness and ethical character expressed in her having Hagar become Avraham’s second wife, yet does not refrain from criticizing Sara for her handling of the situation later. The way Sara brought Hagar to be a second wife is laudable, and an example of humility and morality, but, according to the Ramban, the way she responded when tensions arose was improper.

If we initiate a bold, ambitious project, we must be prepared to accept the difficult challenges that it will present us. Just as Sara was not, according to the Ramban, excused for her inappropriate handling of the tensions that arose as a result of her decision to have Avraham marry Hagar, we are not excused from handling the complications that arise over the course of our admirable, idealistic pursuits. If we set our goals high and embark on ambitious projects, as we of course should, then we must fully accept responsibility for the challenges that they will inevitably entail.

(see Ehud Ben-Ari’s [article](https://shabaton1.co.il/?p=5035) in *Shabbaton*, Parashat Lekh-Lekha, 5770)

Friday

As discussed yesterday, the Torah in Parashat Lekh-Lekha tells of the tense situation that arose after Sara had her maidservant, Hagar, marry Avraham in order to beget a child which would, in a sense, be considered Sara’s offspring. Hagar conceived quickly, at which point she began disrespecting Sara, who was childless. Apparently, Hagar felt that since she was pregnant with Avraham’s only child, she was now the primary wife, and she regarded Sara as the secondary wife. Sara expressed her anger to Avraham, saying, “My wrath is upon you – I placed my maidservant in your bosom, and when she saw that she became pregnant, I became lowly in her eyes. May the Lord judge between you and me!” (16:5). Avraham replied by allowing Sara to treat Hagar however she wished, and Sara then proceeded to “oppress” (“*va-te’aneha*” – 16:6) Hagar, treating her once again like her maidservant, whereupon Hagar fled.

This tense exchange between Sara and Avraham seems, at first glance, difficult to understand. Why did Sara blame Avraham for Hagar’s disrespectful behavior? And why did Avraham respond by allowing Sara to treat Hagar as she wished?

The Radak explains that when Hagar began disrespecting Sara, Avraham remained silent, and did not instruct Hagar to obey Sara’s wishes. Sara, meanwhile, chose not to resume imposing her authority and forcing Hagar into subservience, out of respect for Avraham. She therefore resented Avraham for his passivity, failing to reprimand Hagar. Avraham responded that he authorized Sara to treat Hagar as her maidservant, just like she had done before Avraham and Hagar married.

The Radak adds that although Sara received Avraham’s permission to impose her authority on Hagar, she nevertheless acted improperly by proceeding to do so. He writes:

Sara did not conduct herself in this regard in an ethical manner or in a pious manner… For although Avraham waived his honor, and said to her, “Do to her as is pleasing in your eyes,” it would have been proper for her to withdraw her hand in his honor and not to oppress [Hagar]… For it is not proper for a person to do anything he can with what is under his control. And the wise man said: “How beautiful it is to forego when possible.”

Even though Avraham – who was now married to Hagar – gave consent to have Sara again treat Hagar as her maidservant, Sara should not have done so. As difficult as the situation was, with Hagar now conducting herself with seniority in the household, Sara should have refrained from imposing her authority on Hagar, in consideration of the fact that Avraham was now Hagar’s husband. The Radak enlists this episode as an example of where people are expected to forego on that which they are technically entitled to do for the sake of peaceful relationships. Sensitivity sometimes requires us to refrain from even actions which we are allowed to undertake out of consideration for other people’s feelings. Not everything that is acceptable is necessarily wise or appropriate. The Radak here teaches that we must be prepared to forego on that which we can rightfully demand for the sake of protecting people’s feelings and avoiding unnecessary friction and tensions.