

DVAR TORAH on PARASHA LECH LECHA

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My portion, Lech Lecha (“Go Forth”) recounts Abraham’s (here known as Abram) journey out of the land of his birth, his first encounter with God, his journey to Canaan, his relationship with Sara, his argument with Lot whom he later redeems from captivity, the birth of his son Ishmael with Hagar, the covenant between God and him and his descendants, and God’s commandment that he must circumcise the males of his household.

The piece I want to concentrate on is the quarrel between Lot and Abram.

The English translation is as follows: “Lot, who also went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not support them staying together, for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together. And there was quarrelling between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and those of Lot’s cattle. - The Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land. Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate you from me: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north.” Lot looked about him and saw how well watered the whole plain of the Jordan was, all of it—this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the Garden of the LORD, like the Land of Egypt. So, Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus, they parted from each other.”

It is clear from the preceding verses that Lot and Abram were both wealthy; so, the question is why couldn’t they live together? Was there really not enough pasture for both of them? Rashi says that the reason they couldn’t live together was that there wasn’t sufficient pasture for their cattle. Despite possibly having enough resources if these were shared evenly, something had happened so that the herdsmen were arguing over the land and straying into the other’s pastures. But who was the other? Was it Lot’s herdsmen trespassing into the space occupied by Abram’s stock?

Ramban draws our attention to the introduction of the Canaanites and the Perizzites in the verse. Why is this in here at this point? We know that the land was not empty; there were other people who used the land either on a temporary or permanent basis. Could it be to suggest that while there was quarrelling there would be an opportunity for others to see this as a weakness or a distraction, making them vulnerable to possible stealing of their livestock while they were busy arguing? Or had the herdsmen become greedy and were using land which was used by others? Was it also about the notion that one cannot steal from a non-Jew, something which would be abhorrent to Abram?

What we learn is that Abram tries to resolve the situation in different ways. Firstly, he brought the issue to the surface and brings it out in the open so that they can talk about the situation. At this point Lot did not respond by saying that he was sorry that there had been arguments. He did not try and resolve it or offer to talk to the herdsmen. Because for me there appears to be a break in the dialogue. Lot appears to be silent until Abram tackles the situation and suggests a solution. Despite how angry he might have been with Lot, Lot was after all his nephew and Abram had brought him out of the famine and given him much of the wealth that

he now enjoyed. Abram sets out how they could divide the land between them. There are different ways he could have done this, but he gives Lot the choice of North or South, without indicating if he had a preference. Lot then chose the best parcel of land as it says in the text – “like the Garden of the Lord.” Then they parted from one another, with Abram seemingly showing no anger, resentment or disappointment. Was he hoping that somehow Lot might come to his senses, be more humble, even offer a more equitable solution? Or instead, did he trust in God to somehow resolve this?

What should we take from this story in the Tanach? Particularly, when so much of the world is arguing over land, religion, resources. Is it that we have to separate to survive? Or is it that there is a thing as too much wealth if we fail to use it properly?

I would rather we learn to think about how to resolve issues. Abram shows patience, kindness, flexibility, generosity and humility, and yet he is practical at the same time. It also shows us from this quote -“let there be no strife between you and me ...for we are kinsmen” - that no matter what, Abram still recognises Lot as his family and that takes precedence in his judgement and actions.

It is interesting that after all of the arguments, and how Lot treats Abram, that Abram still gives in to Lot and lets him have the so-called “better land.” Was that because he still recognised Lot as his family or was it just because it felt like the right thing to do? After this, it would appear that Lot learns very little from this experience and fails to recognise the kindness that Abram has showed him and eventually settles near Sodom and Gomorrah, which are eventually destroyed.

However, after the argument and the choosing of land, it would seem that God sees how Abram treated Lot with patience and love, and how Lot treats Abram with unfairness and is unable to appreciate what Abram has done for him. The parasha then goes on to tell us that God bestows his blessing on Abram, perhaps recognising this, and tells Abram that all the land will be given to him and his descendants for all the generations to come.

Could this be the deep meaning of Abram’s offer to Lot? It is only when he is willing to give part of the land away (“If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left”) that God tells him the whole land will be his (“All the land you see I will give to you and your offspring forever”). Is a blessing dependent on our actions? If this is a model about the resolution of difficulties over ownership, it may be that the meaning of this story is that we only truly own what we are willing to share.

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Bat Mitzvah

Shabbat 16 October 2021