

PARSHAS LECH LECHA

תשפ"ז

The Emes That Founded Klal Yisroel

Parshas Lech Lecha begins the story of Klal Yisroel. Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells Avrohom Ovinu, ואעשך לגוי גדול. A great nation will come from him. But it is not so simple. Avrohom had tremendous potential, and he had to demonstrate that he was worthy of that promise. He had to go through ten nisyonos.

To understand what made Avrohom Ovinu different, look at the other people in his family: Terach, Horon, and Lot. Terach was not a simple person. Think about the potential he must have had. Avrohom Ovinu was his son, and all the Imahos descended from him. There was tremendous potential in this family. But potential is one thing. What you do with it is something else.

Avrohom Ovinu must have had a brilliant mind. That is where all those wonderful Jewish minds come from. But there are many brilliant people in the world. Some use their intelligence to find excuses to do whatever they want. Others are honest down to the bottom of their being. Avrohom had an uncompromising bakoshas ho'emes – desire and pursuit of truth. Through his own thinking, he saw through the falsehood of the culture around him and recognized that its avodo zoro was all false and evil.

But he did not stop at recognizing the emes. He wanted to live by it. Because he had a love of truth – ahavas ho'emes, a deep passion for it, he had to share it with others. He stood up and said that the whole system was false. That made him dangerous to Nimrod, and it brought him to the kivshon ho'eish – the fiery furnace. Avrohom was willing to die for what he knew was true.

His brother Horon had a different calculation. Who is winning? I will be on his side. He decided that if Avrohom survived the fiery furnace, he would join him. If not, he would join Nimrod. The emes was not what determined his choice. He wanted to be with the winner. But Hakodosh Boruch Hu was not willing to save him on those terms, and he was killed.

Terach, on the other hand, was inspired by what had happened. As we discussed last week, he decided to leave and go to Sheim ve'Eiver in Be'er Sheva. But he reached Choron and stopped. Like many people, he began with enthusiasm and then fizzled out. Holding on to inspiration takes work. That itself is a nisayon. וימת תרח בדרך. He remained halfway.

Avrohom was different. His commitment to the emes did not depend on who was winning or on whether he still felt inspired. He was prepared to follow it wherever it took him.

Leaving the Past Behind

Until this point, Avrohom had gone as far as a human being could go through his own thinking. But there was another dimension. Hakodosh Boruch Hu had to reveal Himself.

The Midrash describes a person who recognizes that there must be someone in charge of the place he sees. It cannot simply be running by itself. Then the owner reveals himself: אני בעל הבירה. Avrohom had recognized that Someone must be running the world. Now Hakodosh Boruch Hu revealed Himself and told him what to do:

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך.

He had to leave three things. ממולדתך – the culture in which he had grown up. מארצך – the place where he was living now. מבית אביך – his family ties. He had grown up in Ur Kasdim, in southern Iraq near the Persian Gulf, and travelled north to Choron, which today is in Turkey. Now he had to leave again.

This was a deep personal and psychological break. If he was going to found Klal Yisroel, he had to separate himself from his entire past and begin something new. Where was he supposed to go? הארץ אשר אראך. "I am not going to tell you where. Just believe in Me!"

With that demand came the promise:

ואעשך לגוי גדול ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה.

Avrohom was seventy-five years old when he went. Lot, Horon's son, went with him. He was not going to stay with his grandfather Terach in Choron. He, too, was prepared to keep going.

Step by step, they travelled south until they reached Shechem, Elon Moreh. Hakodosh Boruch Hu told Avrohom that He would give this land to his descendants. But there were people everywhere. Where was he supposed to settle? He continued travelling, and before he could settle in, היה רעב בארץ. There was a famine. He had to leave.

Now, Avrohom could have said, "Hakodosh Boruch Hu told me to come here. He made this tremendous promise, and now I have to leave? I am going back to Choron. I am going back to Ur Kasdim. I am giving up on the whole thing!"

No. He understood that somehow this was part of Hakodosh Boruch Hu's plan. He did not know how it would work, or when, or what would happen next. But he trusted the One Who had sent him. That is when his emunah produced the bitachon with which he faced the next step.

Going to Egypt with Bitachon

Hakodosh Boruch Hu was testing Avrohom very severely. Leave everything and begin again in a new place. Then, before you can even settle there, pick up and go to Egypt. As they approached Egypt, another danger appeared:

ויהי כאשר הקריב לבוא מצרימה ויאמר אל שרי אשתו הנה נא ידעתי כי אשה יפת מראה את.

Avrohom recognized the danger that Sorai's beauty would create and told her:

אמרי נא אחתי את למען ייטב לי בעבורך וחיתה נפשי בגללך.

This sounds strange. We would expect him to say, "This is the way we can survive and get through safely." Instead, he first says, לי בעבורך. People make fun of this: "He wants to make money out of the deal!" But that misses what Avrohom was really saying.

He was telling Sorai that if Hakodosh Boruch Hu had brought them to Egypt, this, too, was part of fulfilling His brocho. Somehow it was for their benefit. "I do not understand what is happening, but Hakodosh Boruch Hu is guiding me. He promised, and His promise will be fulfilled." Avrohom did not know how. His confidence did not depend on knowing how.

When he went down to Egypt, he was very poor. Chazal explain וילך למסעיו: on the return journey, he paid the debts he had incurred along the way. Going down, he had stayed at inns and could not pay. "I will pay when I come back."

Do you understand the depths of Avrohom's emunah? He did not have a penny, and he was undertaking to pay on the way back. How did he know he would return with money? Hakodosh Boruch Hu had promised him. He followed what he had been told, even though he could not see how it would work.

There are two types of Jews. One has to have everything figured out in advance. The other says, "I have to do what Hakodosh Boruch Hu says." When Jews fled Eastern Europe and came to England or America, one of the first problems they encountered was Shabbos. How could they survive if they refused to work on Shabbos? It seemed impossible.

But there were yechidei segulah who said, "We have to do what Hakodosh Boruch Hu says. Somehow He will take care of us." And they survived. The same Hakodosh Boruch Hu Who had brought them there had commanded them to keep Shabbos. They were going to follow that command, even without having the whole future worked out.

Avrohom returned from Egypt:

ויעל אברם ממצרים הוא ואשתו וכל אשר לו ולוט עמו הנגבה.

ואברם כבד מאד. He had indeed become very wealthy, and he paid his debts. Lot was still with him. But now Lot had become wealthy as well, and that brought a different nisayon.

Lot and the Nisayon of Wealth

Lot had shown a real high level. When the famine came, he could have said, "My uncle Avrohom is going nowhere. I am going back to Choron." He did not. Terach had stopped, but Lot kept going – to Eretz Canaan and then to Egypt. He was following Avrohom because this was the emes.

But the Lot who returned from Egypt was different from the Lot who went down before. Now he had money. A lot of money. And money changes people's attitudes.

ויהי ריב בין רועי מקנה אברם ובין רועי מקנה לוט והכנעני והפרזי אז ישב בארץ.

What were the shepherds fighting about? Rashi explains that Lot's shepherds allowed their animals to graze in other people's fields. Avrohom's shepherds rebuked them for stealing. Their answer was, "Hakodosh Boruch Hu promised this land to Avrohom. He has no children, and Lot will inherit him. So it already belongs to us."

Does that argument make any sense? No. But when money is involved, people develop very interesting ways of thinking. Everyone has his own Shulchan Aruch and becomes a very big lamdan.

The posuk itself answers them: והכנעני והפרזי אז ישב בארץ. Avrohom had not yet acquired the land. But that obvious fact did not stop Lot's shepherds. Money had begun to determine both Lot and their reasoning.

Avrohom told Lot that they had to separate. "Choose where you want to go, and I will go somewhere else." Lot looked at the Kikar HaYarden and saw כולה מושקה. It was fertile, well-watered land.

When I first came to Eretz Yisroel, before the Intifada, you could travel freely in that area. From the heights near old Yericho, you could look down into a lush, green, beautiful valley. In Lot's time, S'dom and the surrounding plain were the most fertile and wealthiest part of the land. To Lot, the opportunity was irresistible.

But there was another consideration:

ואנשי סדם רעים וחטאים לה' מאד.

He knew what kind of people lived there. Yet the possibility of becoming wealthier outweighed everything else. First came the justification for stealing. Then came the decision to live among evil people. Every calculation was now about money, money, and more money.

The effect reached even Avrohom:

וה' אמר אל אברם אחרי הפרד לוט מעמו.

Rashi explains that while Lot was with him, the communication with Hashem withdrew. Think about that. Avrohom was an unbelievable tzaddik. But he was dealing daily with someone whose thinking had become twisted by money. That association affected his ability to receive communication from Hashem. Once Lot left, Hakodosh Boruch Hu spoke to him again.

Lot had made what seemed a practical calculation. He would go where the money was, and eventually he would inherit Avrohom as well. What did he ultimately end up with? Nothing. He lost it all. The pursuit of wealth that had seemed so practical led him to S'dom and cost him everything.

The War Against Avrohom's Message

Then came the war in which S'dom was conquered and Lot was taken captive. Chazal explain that behind this war was Nimrod's determination to get rid of Avrohom. He had not given up. As long as Avrohom was alive and spreading his message, Nimrod's way of dominating the world was threatened.

The plan was to capture Lot and draw Avrohom into the fight. Avrohom would come to rescue him, and Nimrod would defeat and kill him. All those kings, that entire war had one purpose – to destroy Avrohom and the message he was bringing to the world.

Hitler, yimach shemo vezichro, wanted to eliminate every last Jew. As long as one Jew remained, there was someone representing a different

way of living, a challenge to his philosophy. Iran, too, is out to destroy every Jew in the world. As long as Jews remain, they stand in the way of their religious ambitions; once the Jews are gone, it will be able to convert the Christians to Islam. The Jew represents Hakodosh Boruch Hu in this world. Those determined to fight the Torah's message seek to eliminate those who carry it.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu helped Avrohom win the war. Afterwards, the king of S'dom offered him the wealth, and Avrohom refused. "I do not want your money. I do not need it. Hakodosh Boruch Hu promised me wealth. I am not taking it from you."

Lot's desire for wealth had drawn him towards S'dom. Avrohom's trust in Hakodosh Boruch Hu enabled him to refuse its wealth. He knew where his brocho came from.

Believing in a Future Beyond Nature

Then we come to the Bris Bein HaBesarim and a further dimension of bitachon. Hakodosh Boruch Hu promises Avrohom a child, and descendants who will inherit the land. But Soroh Imeinu was physically incapable of having a child. She had no womb. How could that future come about?

Avrohom says, "You are promising this to my descendants, but I have no child. Eliezer, my eved, will inherit everything." Hakodosh Boruch Hu tells him that his own child will inherit him, and then:

ויוצא אותו החוצה.

The message is: "Avrohom, your calculations tell you that it cannot happen. But if I promise, it will happen." Hakodosh Boruch Hu is not limited by the limitations Avrohom sees.

והאמן בה' ויחשבה לו צדקה.

What was being demanded of him now? He had already been willing to die in the fiery furnace. He had left his old life behind and accepted the famine and the journey to Egypt as part of Hakodosh Boruch Hu's plan. But now he had to live, day after day, with complete confidence in a future that had not happened and, according to nature, could not happen.

It was no longer only a matter of accepting what had happened to him. He had to trust fully in what Hakodosh Boruch Hu said would happen. As we learn in Rabbeinu Avrohom ben HaRambam's discussion of bitachon, that absolute confidence itself was the zechus through which he merited a child.

Yet Avrohom also understood that a promise carries a demand. When Hakodosh Boruch Hu promised him the land, he asked:

במה אדע כי אירשנה.

Rashi explains:

הודיעני באיזה זכות יתקיימו בה.

Through what zechus would his descendants endure in the land? Avrohom knew that Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs the world through reward and punishment – s'char va'onesh. There are no free breakfasts. He was not simply asking what he would receive. He wanted to know what was required to be worthy of it. Hakodosh Boruch Hu answered: through the zechus of korbonos.

That is the Avrohom Ovinu who founded Klal Yisroel. His desire and pursuit of truth brought him to recognize Hakodosh Boruch Hu. His love of truth compelled him to live by that recognition and share it, whatever the cost. The nisyonos tested whether anything could turn him aside – danger, uncertainty, hardship, or wealth. He kept going.

The lesson is already clear. A brilliant mind and tremendous potential are not enough. We have to keep our minds from becoming twisted by what we want, hold on when the first inspiration passes, and live by the emes even when we cannot see where it will take us. That is how Avrohom Ovinu became Avrohom Ovinu, and that is where Klal Yisroel began.