

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

## **(Portion of Lech Lecha)**

When is it time to part ways?

These past weeks Israel seems to be in the grip of a wave of terror: stabbings, shootings, firebombs, and riots, leaving us wondering whether there is anything left of the ‘peace process’; seems more like pieces....

People often say, you don’t make peace with your friends, you make peace with enemies and you have to be willing to sit and dialogue with even your most bitter enemy.

True, but you have to start with an enemy who wants to make peace, and for that matter, which is willing to talk. So maybe it’s time to let go; maybe there is no peace partner and we need to part ways, build fences, and leave attempts at any rapprochement for another day.

And yet, are we really at the point where we must walk away from any hope of peace with our Arab cousins, many of whom I am sure want peace as much as we do?

How do you know when it really is time to let go?

This week’s portion of *Lech Lecha* provides a classic case in point:

It seems that the shepherds of *Avram* (Abraham) and the shepherds of *Lot*, Avram’s nephew, had gotten into an argument big enough that it came to Avram’s attention.

*(Bereishit (Genesis) 12:5-7)*

While the Torah is somewhat vague about the exact nature of the conflict between the shepherds, **Rashi** (Rav Shalom Yitzchak; 11<sup>th</sup> century Biblical commentator), quoting the Midrash (Rabbinic legend) makes it very clear: Lot’s shepherds were stealing, and Avram’s shepherds were taking the moral high ground.

More puzzling than the conflict however, is Avram’s inexplicable reaction to it:

*“And Avram said to Lot: ‘Let there not be a quarrel between you and I and between my shepherds and your shepherds. Behold all the land is before you; please separate (part) from me; if you go left I will go right, and if you go right, I will go left.’” (12:8-9)*

“*Separate from me*”? This is Avram’s great solution to conflict? Bear in mind that this is not an argument with someone you never met who is in your parking space; this is Avram’s own nephew!

In fact, the verse does not actually say Avram and Lot were arguing; it says the argument was between the shepherds. So why does Avram feel Lot should leave? How depressing to think that even the paradigm of loving-kindness in this world can reach the point of no return in his relationship with his own nephew. Is this the blueprint for Jewish ethics? When the going gets a little tough, just go?!

Equally disturbing is Lot’s response: Lot actually chooses to leave the tent of Abraham and live in S’dom, the most wicked and sinful place on earth! How could someone who grew up in what must have been the most ethical place on earth end up in S’dom?

It seems Lot has sunken to a level which precludes his living in the tent of Avram, and with a heavy heart, Lot is told in no uncertain terms he needs to leave.

Interestingly, if one looks closely at the story in the Biblical commentaries, it may well be that the straw that broke the camel's back was not that the shepherds of Lot were stealing; it was that Lot didn't see anything wrong with it.

What a powerful and yet challenging message. When does someone cross a line to the extent that we need to distance ourselves from them? Not when they do wrong, but when they justify it, and perceive it to be right. When right is wrong and wrong is right, then society is upside down, and if we can't remove such a society, we at least need to remove ourselves from it.

And this is true in every aspect of life. When someone you love does something terrible, it is important to be able to deal with it, forgive them, and move on. But if they don't really see anything wrong with what they are doing, then we have to absolutely refuse to live with such norms.

While families with children are murdered and thirteen year old boys are being stabbed in the streets and Mahmoud Abbas and his Palestinian Authority with whom we are supposed to be negotiating peace, do not even pretend to protest. Rather, we hear absurd calls to stop executing Arabs, and fabrications of Jewish/Israeli attempts to destroy the Mosque on the Temple Mount which the Arab leadership knows full well is simply untrue.

So there is no one to talk to. You can't make peace, painful as that may sound, with someone who still wants to destroy you. In fact no modern conflict has ever been settled until somebody won the war. We seem to think we have won the war that our enemies are still fighting.

Maybe we need to take a lesson from Avraham, who four thousand years ago suggested that there is a line in the moral sand one cannot cross, and there are some people and even societies one simply cannot negotiate with.

When a married couple is struggling with their relationship, it's always worth trying to make the marriage work. But there is also wisdom in knowing when the marriage needs to end, even if only because the children are getting hurt and deserve better.

If a society is teaching their children to emulate suicide bombers; if people are dancing on rooftops because missiles are raining down on civilians, and partying in the streets because the Twin Towers collapsed, then there is just no-one to talk to. And while we dream of creating a world where all peoples live together in peace; our challenge is to make sure we are happy with that peaceful world we create. And for our children's sakes, maybe it's time to take a pause, or at least a separation, until we have a partner who is ready to do the work....

There will please G-d come a time we can sit with our Arab cousins in peace, but it seems we are just not there yet...

Shabbat Shalom,

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