Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Lech Lecha)

Somehow, the computers or the staff making such decisions had really fouled this one up; how could anyone have thought this fellow was suited to be a gunner?

His name was Shachar, which means 'the dawn', and the joke was with him around it was always dawn, because he blotted out the sun. He was a massive fellow, and watching him squeeze into the gunner's seat, the smallest, most confined place in the tank, deepin the belly of the turret, was a sight to behold. He told me the reason he had fought so hard to get into Sergeant's (Commander's) course was because it was the only way he could think of to get out of the gunner's turret….

One would think with such a fellow sharing your tank, there would be a lot less room to breathe, but in fact the opposite was true. Somehow, his sharp sense of humor, and the smile always twinkling at the corners of his mouth, made it seem like there was lots of room, and late at night when the maneuvers were done for the night, guys would end up hanging out in our tank to shoot the breeze with Shachar. Sometimes nine or ten guys would be crowded on and in the tank, sharing a good laugh, and the smallest bag of pistachio nuts he always carried seemed to go on forever. It always fascinated me that at the end of the week, back on base, the room I shared with a different group of guys seemed a lot smaller than the tiny tank turret we all had to maneuver around in.

It was only later, in Officer's course that the mysterious truth of this reality really hit home. In the winter, out in the field, it is incredibly depressing to have to sleep out in the tanks. The desert nights where we were training are bitter cold, and finding a spot in and around the tank to stretch out in was always extremely challenging. The best place to sleep, strange as it may sound, was usually (barring rain) out on the 'sipun' or flat rear of the tank, on top of the engine. Long after the tank went quiet, the heat of the engine kept the exterior of the tank warm, which made for a cozy night's sleep. Usually, there was a scramble to get your sleeping bag laid out there at the end of the night inspection, so you could get the best spot.

Somehow, Shachar had figured out a way for all four of us to sleep out on the sipun. I thought this was a great trick, and made sure to watch how we slept as I thought it would be a great trick to share with my crew one day as an officer.

But years later, and ever since, as hard as I have tried, I have never been able to replicate Shachar's feat, which is especially strange when considering how much space Shachar himself must have taken up. In fact, one night, in trying to arrange my crew in just such a manner, I nearly rolled off the tank, sleeping bag and all!

I guess space isn't about where you are; it is somehow connected to who you are.

Perhaps this is at the root of a rather challenging story in this week's portion, *Lech Lecha:*

"And Avram was very rich, ("heavy") with livestock, silver and gold… And Lot, who accompanied Avram, also had cattle and tents. And the land could not support them living together; their wealth was so great they could not dwell together.

"And there was an argument ("riv") between the shepherds of Avram, and the shepherds of Lot, and the Canaanites and the Perizites then dwelled in the land. And Avram said to Lot, let there not be a quarrel (Merivah) between you and me, and between my shepherds and your shepherds. After all, we are brothers. Behold, all the land is before you, why not separate from me? If you will go left (North), then I will go right (South), and if you go to the right then I will go left. (Genesis 13:2 –9)

What exactly is going on here? Four thousand years ago, there wasn't enough room for Avram to live with his own nephew?

One would have imagined Avraham to be an individual so above all these things; how came even Avraham, the paradigm for loving kindness, to such an impasse of divisiveness?

Stranger still, is Avram's response to this argument, or friction. There seems to be no attempt at rapprochement, no discussion with an eye towards resolving differences. Rather, Avram's immediate reaction is to suggest a parting of the ways. Why was there no attempt at compromise? Especially considering that Lot was not merely an acquaintance of Avram's but his only nephew, and that Avram, already nearing eighty years old has no other living heir. How could Avram just send Lot away like that?

It is interesting to note that this path of separation in the face of conflict is a pattern found elsewhere in the bible, most notably in the case of Yishmael. There too, there seems to be some conflict between Yishmael, son of Hagar and Abraham, and Yitzchak, son of Abraham and Sarah. And there too, the response, on two separate occasions, is banishment. Yishmael, Avram's own son, is sent off into the desert, as apparently the only solution to the conflict between the two half brothers.

How can this be? Did Avram really exhaust the possible approaches to a more amiable solution? What are we to learn from all this? If our children fight with each other, should we simply get rid of one of them?

The text suggests that "*the land could not support them living together; their wealth was so great they could not dwell together"* (verse 6). Can this really be? Was there not enough room in all the grazing lands of the hilltops to support one more shepherd?

Perhaps the most telling allusion to what is really going on here, is Lot's reaction to Avram's suggestion:

"And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the entire Jordan Valley (plain), which was very fertile (irrigated), before Hashem destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah; it was like G-d's own garden, like the land of Egypt, up until Tzoar. And Lot chose for himself the entire Jordan Valley, and headed eastward, and they separated one from his brother. And Avram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities

of the plain, casting his tent as far as Sedom. And the people of Sedom were very wicked and sinful to G-d."

(Genesis 13:10-13)

How does someone go straight from the kindness and goodness of the tents of Abraham, to the cruelty and wickedness of Sedom? Indeed, how could it be that the nephew of Abraham would even ***want*** to live in Sedom? Especially when considering that the beginning of this week's portion paints Lot as a partner in the journey of Abraham to an unknown land, at the behest of G-d.

All alone in a world of pagan idolatry, Abraham leaves behind everything he knows: his home and family, the land of his birth, choosing to follow a dream to an unknown land, in pursuit of a better world. Indeed, Jewish tradition teaches that Abraham is called an "*Ivri*", the source of why we are called Hebrews to this day, based on the word (of the same root) Ever, or 'the side, because, suggests tradition, all the world was on one side, and Abraham on the other. They must have all thought him mad, with this strange idea of an unseen G-d intangible, and even incomprehensible. And the only one (aside from his partner and wife, Sarah) to go with him was Lot (12:4). In fact, on a certain level, one wonders whether Lot's commitment was even greater than Abraham's. After all, Abraham heard the voice of G-d.

Wouldn't you go anywhere if you were convinced G-d was telling you to go? But Lot didn't have the privilege of that direct communication from G-d. He had to take Uncle Abe's word for it.

So what happened? What went wrong? Clearly, Sedom was not a sudden flash of inspiration. If you are standing in the tents of Abraham and seeing Sedom, then you are already there. When and how did Lot go wrong? And why could Abraham not find a way to bring him back in to the fold, as it were?

It is worth noting that in between Abraham's arrival in the land of Israel with Lot, and their separation over this mysterious friction, there is another significant event.

Almost immediately upon his arrival in the land of Israel, there is a famine in the land, and Abraham is forced to travel to Egypt in search of sustenance. (12:10-20)

Indeed, the Rabbis perceive this to be one of the ten great tests Abraham faces in his life. It must have been an inordinate challenge to have to leave almost as soon as he arrived. What does it do to your faith, when an act which seems to be an act of G-d forces you to abandon not just your dream, but what you are convinced is the call of G-d. It is interesting that unlike the journey he embarks upon initially to the land of Israel, here there is no communication from G-d. G-d doesn't tell Abraham what to do; he has to figure it out on his own.

There is something very comforting about knowing, with absolute certainty, what you are meant to do. Even if you are deluding yourself, life is so much easier when you know exactly where you are headed. But somehow, something always comes along to challenge that certainty. Even in G-d's initial command to Abraham, he doesn't make it absolutely clear, telling him to go to '*the land that I will show you*". (12:1)

One can almost hear Abraham having to struggle with the question, when the famine arrives: maybe the land G-d wants me to be in is really Egypt? After all, if G-d wanted me to stay here, why would he have

sent this famine? So Abraham journeys down to Egypt, the land of plenty, and, more to our point, the land described by the Rabbis as the land of wickedness. And Lot goes down with him.

One wonders if they have failed in their attempt to settle the land of Israel. But eventually Abraham succeeds in coming back home. And there is a very interesting verse that is worth noting, upon Abraham's return.

"*And Avram arose from Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he possessed, and Lot with him towards the Negev*." (13:1)

This is very different from the order described in Avram's journey to Israel (12:4), where Lot is described as journeying *with* Avram, and listed immediately after his wife Sarah (12:5). Indeed, in 13:5, Lot is described upon their return from Egypt as walking opposite ("*Et*") Avram, and is mentioned as separate from Avram.

Something happened to Lot down in Egypt, which had a profound influence on his worldview. Before Egypt, he is part of the family, but by the time they get back; he is walking a different path.

Lot may have physically come back from Egypt, but a part of him never leaves. Hence,
*"…Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the entire Jordan Valley (plain), which was very fertile … **like the land of Egypt**."*

Egypt is a society steeped in pagan idolatry, which was all about the worship of nature, epitomized by the land.

Lot is so busy seeing the flocks and the land, he loses sight of what is real in this world. In fact, if what is important is the land, then obviously, it makes a lot more sense to live in the valley, where the land is so much more fertile.

So Lot, standing up in the mountains with Abraham, is really already in the valley; he is just looking for the excuse to get there. And Avram's approach to it all is a lesson we so need to internalize, especially today.
What do you do when you have more than enough room on the mountain, but someone else is already in the valley? You have to let him go. You can't tell, convince, or otherwise move someone to be in the mountain if they are really in the valley. To live together on the mountain, you have to be speaking with someone who is with you on the same mountain. You can discuss how you live together on the, mountain, but that can only happen if you are speaking with someone who is already a mountain person.

But if you are on the mountain and they are in the valley, you have to accept you just aren't ready to live together on the mountain; they just aren't there.

A number of years ago I received a challenging e-mail from a student that so disturbed me, I had to take the time to pen at least a brief response. This student, studying in the M.A. Int'l Affairs program at George Washington University, had a disturbing session with one of her professors, who happens to be Syrian. His lecture was on the 1967 war, and he basically said, to quote this student's letter, that:

> "*Israel invaded the Golan to get control over the water so it could channel it down to the Negev-- the National Water Carrier. The occupation of Sinai and the West Bank were all just extensions of this water grabbing agenda."*

My response to her was largely on the issues themselves: How does this Professor explain the nearly 1,000 shells a day that fell from the Syrian controlled Golan Heights on the kibbutzim and settlements of the north between prior to 1967? And what of Syria's attempts to divert the waters of the Yarmuk River in 1964, in an attempt to dry up the Kinneret Lake, Israel's only natural, freshwater lake? And what of Syria's refusal to accept Clinton's proposal, in exchange for a peace agreement with Israel, to upgrade Syria's irrigation and water supply system whose faulty pipes cost Syria 47% of her natural water?

Perhaps the point of this story in the Torah is that sometimes we need to recognize when a person, or even a people, is just not ready to live up on the mountain. And when you have done what you can do, if a person is in a different place, maybe this just isn't the time.

We may sometimes have no choice to avoid an argument. However, just because I may be in an argument, does not mean I have to let the argument be in me.

Abraham, in this moment teaches the world that where you are is not just about where you are, it really is about who you are as well.

Ultimately we can always decide that we refuse to go somewhere, inside our hearts and minds. Avraham understood that the only solution, however painful, was to allow Lot to go to where he really already was.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,
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