

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Lech Lecha)

Sometimes, you can't change the world, and in order to make sure the world doesn't change you, difficult and often painful decisions are necessary.

I still remember the sinking feeling in my gut when I realized who the culprit was, and what I probably was going to have to do about it.

I had come to this army unit as a young officer, full of motivation and inspired to make a difference, only to discover that the reality of army life often had its own set of rules.

One of the most damaging norms in army life is how easy it is, even as a relatively honest person, to become a thief. People justify it by differentiating between outright theft and minor pilfering, whether grabbing extra cookies from the kitchen when the cooks aren't looking, or swiping an extra pair of pants before inspection from a different tent because in the middle of the night someone swiped yours. At the end of the day, however, theft is theft, and it is a struggle to stay 'clean' all the way through training.

Still, there are certain rules and codes you learn quickly, that most soldiers instinctively understand. No normal soldier steals weapons or numbered items (called 'tselem' because of their value) such as binoculars, radios and of course guns and you don't ever take personal belongings from anyone, especially from the guys in your own unit.

Guys will rationalize taking things they deem to be the collective army's (such as swiping an extra rain parka out of the huge pile in the supply depot (knowing the clerks will always find a way to adjust the count and make it right for inspection, as is their specialty...) but usually draw the line at pilfering from a buddy's gear.

Which was why it was so distressing to discover that we apparently had a thief in the unit; things were disappearing, and some of the guys were getting upset.

When one of the men came to me, upset because someone had taken his cologne from his open locker, I thought the guys were either setting me up for a gag, or that this particular soldier was letting little issues become big ones. After all, one guy is heading out on a weekend pass and wants to impress his girlfriend and 'borrows' a buddy's cologne, right?

But when a scarf disappeared from a package one of the guys had been sent, it was clear we had a problem, and if you can't trust the guys in your unit everything else starts to fall apart.

It took me a few weeks of detective work and entrapment to catch the guy and I still remember the look on his face when I found my cologne and flashlight (which I had doused in the cologne as part of my entrapment) in his kitbag. No remorse; no embarrassment; just a wicked grin.

"Hey, it's only on loan..." was his response.

It was a painful shock to discover who the thief was, especially as he was one of the guys who was always helpful, and when he realized I was bringing him up on charges and demanding his removal from our battalion (eventually settling for his transfer out of our company; there are three companies, a smaller unit of only about 30 guys, in each battalion) not only was he upset with me, but some of his buddies in the unit who were good men themselves spent a fair amount of time trying to convince me that it wasn't a big deal, and that ejecting him from the unit would seriously damage morale.

It took me a couple weeks to get him kicked out of our unit, which included having to convince the battalion commander that one of us would have to go, because I refused to serve with or command a thief who could steal from his own buddies, and they finally just switched him into one of the other companies on the base.

It took me a lot longer to struggle with whether I was right or had just made a terrible error in judgment. After all, in the end he was a good guy who you could count on to cover your back, and pilfering was almost an inevitable part of army life.... Was it fair to put a blotch on his service record forever?

How does one find the appropriate balance between 'live and let live' - learning not to sweat the small stuff on the one hand, and refusing to compromise with evil and wrong-doing on the other?

If you are standing in the supermarket and someone cuts the line in front (or even in back) of you, should you demand he leave the line, and call for store personnel to remove him from the store? Or is that getting a little too stressed out? Is it worth getting stressed over the little things? After all, maybe he is a soldier on leave who is in a rush to get back to base...? Where do we draw the line, and how do we know when immoral or unethical behavior should not be tolerated, and when we should just let it go?

This week's portion of *Lech Lecha* provides with the classic case in point.

It seems that the shepherds of Avram (Abraham) and the shepherds of Lot, Avram's nephew, have gotten into an argument big enough to come to Avram's attention.

Ve'gam le'Lot ha'holech et Avram hayah tzon u'bakar ve'ohalim. Ve'lo' nasa otam ha'aretz lashevet yachdav, ki' haya re'chusaham rav, ve'lo' yachlu' lashevet yachdav. Va'yehi riv bein ro'ei mikneh Avram, u'bein roei' mikneh Lot, ve'haKena'ani ve'haPerizi az yoshev ba'aretz.

And Lot also, who went with Avram (back up from Egypt) had flocks and cattle and tents. And the land could not support them dwelling together for their property was great, and they could not dwell together. And there was an argument between the shepherds of Avram's cattle, and the shepherds of Lot's cattle, and the Canaanites and the Perizites were then dwelling in the land. (Bereishit (Genesis 12: 5-7).

Apparently, now that Avram and his nephew Lot had both acquired so much property there wasn't enough room for the both of them. Can you imagine? In Israel today there are over ten million people. And sitting in America reading the Times looking at a map spread out on the table, one might imagine there is just no more room in this tiny little country.

But come to Israel and spend a day in the Galil, or the *Negev*, or the Judean Mountains, and believe me, there is plenty of room. Endless vistas stretching as far as the eye can see. So how could there not have been enough room for two families four thousand years ago? How sad is that? And especially when considering that one of these people is no less than Abraham himself? I would have thought that if you live next door to a man of such sterling quality as Abraham, there is always enough room, no?

The Torah does not tell me exactly what the argument, though obviously the root of the issue begins with the fact that now, everyone has a lot of ‘stuff’. There is a saying in Jewish tradition: *Marbeh nechasim, marbeh tzarot*. More things, more *tzaros* (troubles). And this seems to be no exception.

However, while the Torah is somewhat vague about the exact nature of the conflict between the shepherds, **Rashi** (Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki; 11th century Biblical commentator), quoting the Midrash (Rabbinic legend) makes it very clear:

“Because Lot’s shepherds were wicked and allowed their flocks to graze in the fields of others, and Avram’s shepherds would tell them off (criticize them) for stealing, to which they (Lot’s shepherds) would respond: ‘G-d promised the land to Avram, who has no heir, so Lot his nephew will inherit from him, so this is really not stealing. But the verse says: “and the Canaanites and the Perizites were then dwelling in the land”, because Avram had not yet merited (acquired) it.” (Rashi 12:7)

In other words, Lot’s shepherds were stealing, and Avram’s shepherds were taking the moral high ground.

It is worth noting that Rashi, perhaps in an attempt to explain why the Torah adds these additional words (“*and the Canaanites and the Perizites were then dwelling in the land*”), seems to be veering far beyond the normal scope of his commentary by expanding on the back and forth between the shepherds. Typically, Rashi (as he states in his introduction to the Book of Genesis) is interested only in extrapolating the contextual understanding of the verse. Yet here, rather than suffice with the simple statement that Lot’s shepherds were grazing illegally, Rashi launches into a lengthy back and forth as to what they said and why they were arguing. Why is this so important? What does the fact that Lot’s shepherds felt the land was already theirs add to our general understanding of the issue here? And again, how could such an argument develop in the tents of holy and virtuous father Abraham?

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

“Va’yomer Avram el Lot: al na tehi’ merivah beini u’veinecha’ u’vein roai’ u’vein roecha’,ki’ anashim achim anachnu. Halo’ kol ha’aretz lefanecha’; Hipared na’ me’alai; im ha’smol ve’eiminah, ve’im hayemin ve’asmeilah.”

“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! The same flesh and blood (son of Avram’s deceased brother Haran) who came up with him to Canaan in the first place when Avram was commanded to leave everything behind and journey to “*the land that I will show you*” (Genesis 12;1). And while Avram was following the word of G-d who had spoke with him, Lot was not necessarily privy to that conversation.

It may well have taken a tremendous act of faith on Lot’s part to embark on this journey. After all, people must have thought Avram was mad; what would you say if your neighbor told you he was off on a journey to the mountains of Tibet because G-d had spoken to him yesterday? At least Avram could shrug off such ridicule knowing G-d had indeed spoken to him, but for Lot it was all about trusting Avram.

And this is the same Lot who then accompanies Avram down to Egypt when, shortly after arriving in Canaan, there is a great famine and no sustenance to be found in the land. A lesser man at this point might

have packed his bags, but Lot stays the course, and follows Avram back up to Canaan a second time, though now he clearly has the means to make it on his own in Egypt, a land of plenty.

And bear in mind as well, that 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 what we are meant to espouse? Is this the blueprint for Jewish ethics? When the going gets a little tough, just go?

Equally disturbing is Lot's response, especially since one might have expected better from someone who comes of age in the tents of Abraham:

“Va'yisa Lot et eianav, va'yar et kol kikar ha'Yarden ki' kulah' mashkeh, lifnei shachet Hashem et S'dom ve'et Amorah; ke'gan Hashem, ke'erezt mitzraim bo'acha' Tzoar. Va'yivchar lo' Lot et kol kikar ha'Yarden, va'yisah Lot mi'kedem, v'yipardu' ish me'al achiv. Avram yashav be'erezt Ke'na'an ve'Lot yashav be'arei ha'kikar va'ye'ehal ad S'dom. Ve'anshei S'dom raim ve'chataim la'Hashem me'od.”

“And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw the entire Jordan valley which was all lush, before G-d destroyed S'dom and Amorah; like the garden of G-d, like the land of Egypt as you come to Tzo'ar. And Lot chose the entire Jordan valley and Lot traveled from (to?) the East, and they parted, each man from upon his brother. Avram dwelled in Canaan and Lot dwelled in the cities of the valley and cast his tents up till S'dom. And the people of S'dom were exceedingly wicked and sinful to G-d.” (13:10-14)

Lot actually chooses to leave the tent of Abraham and live in S'dom, the most wicked and sinful place on earth! That is akin to growing up in the house of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and deciding you need a change of pace... and leaving to take a job as a bookie for the mob! How could someone who grew up in what must have been the most ethical place on earth, end up in S'dom? Where did Avram go wrong? And most of all, it almost seems as though Avram pushed Lot out the door!

Yet the Torah provides us with a valuable clue in helping us to understand how and why Lot chose S'dom.

When the Torah describes Avram's initial journey to Canaan (the land of Israel) it says (12:5) he took along Sarai his wife, Lot his nephew, and all their property, in that order. But when describing their return after being in Egypt, the order is changed, and the Torah (13:1) says Avram took Sarai, their property and Lot.

It seems all their property has come between Avram and Lot; there is now a distance between Avram and Lot.

Something happens to Lot while they are all in Egypt; he becomes immersed in all that Egypt represents. Egypt, the mightiest Empire on earth at the time, is all about materialism and the physical world. Even their religion, based on paganism, is itself the worship of the physical and Lot becomes enamored by the pure unadulterated hedonism that is Egypt. (Indeed, Avram lies about Sarai being his wife, telling the Egyptians she is his sister, out of fear that they will kill him in order to have her, so this indeed is a society steeped in immorality.

Avram may have brought Lot up with him when he left Egypt, but a part of Lot is still there, hence, when looking out on the Valley of S'dom, he sees it as a lush land, *“like the land of Egypt”*. Lot never really

leaves Egypt and all that it represents, and maybe, if Avram realizes this, he understands he cannot decide where Lot should be, Lot has to make that decision on his own.

Equally reasonable however, is the possibility that Avram actually decides 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.

This does not, incidentally, mean Avram ever stops loving Lot and caring for him. After all, when hearing that Lot has been taken captive, Avram goes to war against no less than five kings to save him. But they can no longer live together.

And while it may be that Avram desperately hoped Lot would leave his desires and evil ways aside and stop at nothing to stay with Avram, it is also obvious that something has changed such that as things stand Lot has to go. What is this line that was crossed? What has to happen to make an Avram, the paradigm of loving-kindness, who argues with G-d to try and save S'dom itself, decide to expel Lot from his home?

There are many instances in the Torah where such a line seems to have been crossed forcing the necessary expulsion of a person or persons. Adam and Eve have to leave the Garden of Eden, Cain is exiled from society and doomed to a life of wandering, Joseph is thrown in a pit by his brothers, possibly because they felt he had crossed a line and could no longer remain a part of the family, and of course we, the Jewish people, 2,500 years ago, were expelled by no less than G-d Himself from the land of Israel.

In order to understand what the common denominator of these events is, it is worth taking a brief look at what may well be the most painful and even tragic example of this phenomenon in the entire scriptures: the fall of King Saul from grace with G-d and with Shmuel (Samuel) the prophet.

Saul, Israel's first King, has been given what amounts to a difficult and terrible commandment: to destroy, once and for all, the nation of Amalek. The same Amalek which attacked Israel from the rear for no apparent reason immediately after the splitting of the Red Sea, and were terrorizing the Jewish people ever since, are a society so steeped in evil, that the world will be better off without them.

Imagine being commanded by G-d directly to destroy Nazi Germany in its entirety, in 1941. Even if you knew what was coming, you would probably still find it difficult to kill every last German citizen. But this is what G-d commanded Saul to do. Amalek had become a society so evil, it was no longer redeemable.

Saul was unable to complete the task. He takes pity on King Agag, the last remaining Amalekite and cannot bring himself to cut down a man begging and sobbing on his knees. Agag is spared. He is commanded to destroy all the property including the livestock and flocks, but the people want to save the cattle; after all an animal is an animal, right? How can a cow be evil? (Although we might hesitate to adopt dogs used in Auschwitz to maim Jewish concentration camp prisoners....) So instead they allow the animals to live, offering the best cattle up as sacrifices to G- d.

When Shmuel the prophet arrives, and hears the flocks and sees Agag, he understands Saul has disobeyed the word of G-d. Accused by Shmuel, Saul responds:

"... but I did obey the voice of G-d...and brought back Agag, but the Amalekites I destroyed. And the people took of the spoils, sheep and cattle... to sacrifice to the Lord your G-d..." (Samuel I; 15: 20-25)

And when Shmuel nonetheless castigates Saul for his mistake (after all, what value do sacrifices to G-d hold, if they are themselves a violation of what he has commanded...), Saul explains that his mistake was in listening to the people who wanted the cattle, and entreats Shmuel to come back to the camp and worship G-d (ostensibly with these same sacrifices that have already been offered).

To this, Shmuel replies (15:26):

"... I will not return with you for you have disgusted G-d."

And, even more severe (15: 35):

"And Shmuel never saw Saul again as long as he lived."

Realize that Shmuel was more than just a prophet to Saul; he was his mentor, his Rebbe. A perusal of the story of Saul reveals very clearly that they must have had a very close relationship, and that Shmuel loved Saul very much. And yet, something happens to cause Shmuel to cut Saul off in much the same way it appears Avram did with Lot. What is it about Saul's mistake that caused Shmuel to take such a hard line?

Rav Avigdor Miller in his *Shiurim* series suggests that we are looking at here is a basic flaw in Saul's process of repentance.

Maimonides points out that there are three components necessary for a person to really modify their negative behavior. A person must have:

1. *Hakarot ha'chet*; recognition of the mistake: You have to know that what you are doing is wrong.
2. *Charata'*; regret: It has to bother you; you have to be ripped up by the wrong- doing.
3. *Kaballah le'atid*: You have to be so bothered by your mistake that you are determined to change, and decide that you will, in the future, never make this mistake again.

Imagine you catch someone at work stealing money from the cash register. And when he realizes he is caught, his face turns white, and he can't even look at you. Imagine you bring him into your office and he starts to cry, and he realizes he has done a terrible thing, and he swears that if you will only give him a chance, he will never do it again. You would probably give him another chance, right? He has admitted he is wrong; he knows he has done a terrible thing (*Hakarot ha'chet*), he sincerely regrets it (*Charata'*) and he seems determined to change in the future (*Kaballah le'atid*). And we all make mistakes, right?

But what if, upon being confronted, he laughs at you? Or he rationalizes it by saying he's just borrowing the money, and after all, what's so terrible about taking ten dollars when he brings in so much business and is such an asset? Well, if it were me, I'd fire him on the spot, because such a person is never going to change. And worse, he has made wrong into right and confused good and evil to such an extent that he no longer knows the difference.

And this, it would seem, was Saul's mistake: he doesn't really admit or accept that he is really wrong; after all, the animals are sacrificed to G-d, and the people pressured him.... Unlike King David, who, when confronted with his sin with Bathsheba humbly responds "*Chatati*" "*I am wrong*", Saul just doesn't get it. And when evil becomes good and the line between right and wrong becomes so blurred that we no longer can tell one from the other, everything we stand for as a people is at risk. And that, perhaps, is the point at which we need to create a little distance.

If the King of the Jewish people is rationalizing disobeying G-d himself, then how will we ever become a light unto the Nations? And if the potential inheritor of the legacy of Abraham thinks Egypt and S'dom are great places to hang your hat, it is only a matter of time before the people he shares a tent with start to consider his points as having merit.

This is why Rashi takes the time to delineate the dialogue between the shepherds of Avram and Lot: because that is the point. The straw that broke the camel's back was not that the shepherds of Lot were stealing; it was that they didn't see anything wrong with it. And if Lot's shepherds think wrong is right, it can only mean their employer Lot is OK with that and it won't be long before the rest of the camp starts considering the merits of that position as well. That, perhaps, is why Lot has to go.

What a powerful and yet challenging message. When does someone cross a line to the degree 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. In fact, this really was Nazi Germany' good became evil, and evil became good. And the greatest danger is not that I am conquered by evil; it is when I become evil.

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.

We all expect our children to make mistakes, and we try to help them learn from those mistakes, however terrible they may be. But if our children do not even see their errors as mistakes, then something is terribly wrong.

If this is true on an individual level, it is equally true on a National level. What Germany did more than seventy years ago was evil in its purest form, and as a world, we cannot allow such evil to exist in our midst; it has no place in the community of nations. But if Germany recognizes the tremendous evil in their past, and carries the guilt for all that happened, and is truly determined to change and never to allow it to recur, then they can eventually re-enter the community of Nations.

If, however, a society is teaching their children to emulate suicide bombers; if people are dancing on rooftops because scud missiles are raining down on civilians, and partying in the streets because the twin Towers collapsed, then that is a society we cannot tolerate, and we must distance ourselves from.

Perhaps, what Abraham was teaching the world all those thousands of years ago, is that there is a line we cannot cross. 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.

Shabbat Shalom,

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