

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

**“Look to Avraham, Your Forefather”
By Rav Shimon Klein**

A Sterile Space

And God said to Avram, “Take yourself from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” (*Bereishit* 12:1)

It is with these words that the primordial Hebrew journey – Avraham’s move to the land of Cana’an – is introduced. “Take yourself” – leave your place, God commands him (literally, the command might be translated as, “Go for yourself”). He indicates that Avram must cut himself off from three circles of life: “your land” – your affiliation, or sense of belonging, to the broader space in which you exist; “your birthplace” – the extended family circle; and “your father’s house” – the close, nuclear family. To where will Avraham go? God goes on to speak of “the land” – a certain specific place – “which I will show you” – without telling you right now where it is, but when you get there, I will show it to you. God extends his arm, as it were, and says, “Come with Me,” inviting Avraham into a sort of shared experience; later on, He will show him.

Avraham must sever himself from three distinct circles. On the other hand, he is pointed in just one direction – “the land that I will show you.” One land is traded for another, but what about the other two circles? For the meantime, the question is left open. The land in which he will live is not his birthplace, and one’s father’s house is not something that can be exchanged. These two elements will have to be rebuilt in the generations to come.

Why must Avraham sever himself? Why can he not set off on his journey while maintaining his family ties and a connection to the life circles in which he has grown up and lived his life? In our *shiur* on [Parashat Noach](#), we noted the fact that in *Sefer Bereishit*, God speaks with only one individual during any given period (or with one family – a man and his wife), but not with two separate people. This is a function of the situation reflected in the *Sefer*. The world is still a pagan, divided place; as yet, there is no platform connecting the contrasts and including them within a single overarching, unified system. This being the case, God draws Avraham out of his natural life-circles and draws, as it were, a loftier, “sterile” plane that will allow his spiritual path, his calling in the Name of One God, to take root in reality and

emerge into the world.¹

“And I Shall Make of You a Great Nation”

Avraham is given four promises. One pertains to a physical reality: “I shall make of you a great nation” – God promises him a great mass of descendants. This outcome is also accompanied by a blessing: “And I shall bless you.” A second promise concerns the realm of consciousness: “And I shall make your name great.” This speaks to the manner in which other people will regard him and treat him; he will be viewed as one of the great figures in the world. This, too, comes with a blessing: “And you shall be a blessing.” The third promise concerns people who will bless or curse him, who will be repaid accordingly: “I shall bless those who bless you, and those who curse you – I will curse.” In contrast to the second promise, which speaks of people admiring Avraham and giving glory to his name, God now speaks of people blessing him, thereby joining themselves to the abundance of blessing that is characterized by and associated with him. Conversely, a curse will adhere to anyone who curses him and thereby severs himself from the source of blessing. Finally, this circle of blessing is extended outward: “And all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.” This will happen as a natural outcome, as it were, without Divine intervention. The description of the occurrence of this blessing in passive form (“shall be blessed”) indicates that it occurs inwardly: the blessing will spread everywhere, until it is assimilated within the world of the families of the earth, wherever they are. Avraham is to emerge into the world as a symbol, a representative, a bearer of blessing.

Let us now take a deeper look. Imagine a man whom God addresses, telling him, “Come with Me, we will change the world;” or, “all the families of the earth can be blessed through you.” What would an invitation of this sort generate in a person? What would happen between him and the world around him? A call like this could cause a dramatic change both in the person’s relationship with God and in his relationship with the world. Towards God, he will now enjoy a closeness and bond, and this might give him great confidence in the weight that will be awarded to anything that he says before God.² With respect to the rest of the world, the thought that “all of humanity is going to be influenced by you” might cause him to adopt a new and different stance in relation to those around him. A great, powerful, containing love will be kindled in him, with the ability to overlook petty differences.

1 We also elaborated in the *shiur* on *parashat Noach* on the basic action characterizing *Sefer Bereishit* as being one of separation at the point of differentness. We argued that at this stage, there was not yet any developed “formation” that might create connections and bestow harmony; instead, the movements are existential, filling reality in its raw state, as God created it. This process is a central axis around which the events of the *sefer* unfold. By the end of the *sefer*, the characters and the relevant elements are ready, having taken up their positions on the stage of history. In the case of Avraham as well, his separation from his various life circles may be viewed as part of a broader phenomenon in which it is differentiation and separation that serve to define the different creations and their different paths in the world.

2 A clear expression of this is to be found in the story of Sodom, where Avraham fearlessly argues with God.

In this *shiur*, we will explore these qualities as pertaining to space. At a given point of departure, Avraham is located in three spaces that represent three circles of affiliation: land-birthplace-home. Now, he is drawn out of all three and asked to adopt a different position. In relation to God, he is invited into a sort of partnership, to climb and elevate himself to a place of closeness and cooperation. Eventually, he will come to be called a “prince of God,” and some will even argue that in light of this status, he should not receive a portion or inheritance in the land.³ In relation to man, he is drawn out in order to bring a message to humanity, and this fact puts him in a different place – a place that is at the same time more elevated and more inclusive and containing. His name, “Avram,” may express something of this position. He is an “av” (father) who is “ram” (elevated), someone who occupies a higher plane than the rest of humanity, seeing further, and a sort of father to all. A father is not supposed to be on the same playing field as his son. His broader perspective and the responsibility that he bears for his son place him in a different position, which also takes into account a range of data and considerations that lie beyond the perspective of the son, who is closer to the “here and now.”

This unique position, then, would seem to hold the key to explaining Avraham’s behavior in different situations. In this *shiur*, we will focus on what takes place between Avraham and his nephew Lot.

Lot Joins Avraham

And Avram journeyed, as God had spoken to him, and Lot went with him; and Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan. (12:2)

In this verse, Avraham executes God’s command. The mention of Lot as going (*va-yelekh*) in the same verse that describes Avraham’s going (*va-yelekh*) serves to compare the actions of these two characters, imbuing them with similar significance, suggesting that Lot seeks to join and be part of this destiny and vision.

Another verse describes Avraham as taking Sarah, Lot, and his possessions and leaving to set off for Canaan:

And Avram took Sarai, his wife, and Lot, his nephew, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had acquired in Charan, and they went forth to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.

At first glance, this verse seems to be repeating information that is already known to us; the fact that Avraham undertakes the journey has already been noted, and Lot, too, has already been mentioned. Furthermore,

³ In an attempt to stop him from purchasing a burial plot, the people of Chevron tell Avraham, “Hear us, my lord: you are a mighty prince (or “a prince of God”) among us; in the choicest of our sepulchers bury your dead” (*Bereishit* 23:6). “You are a prince of God” – not like us, the “people of the land” (*ibid.*). You are a sort of priest, whose inheritance is God; you are not supposed to have an inheritance in our midst. As a priest, choose where you would like to bury your dead, and you will be given the right to bury wherever you choose.

there is a contradiction between the earlier depiction of Lot as joining Avraham of his own initiative and the later documenting of Avraham as having taken Lot along with him. The solution to these questions lies in the perspective from which each of the verses is written. The earlier verse maintains a discourse with the great Divine call to Avraham, instructing him to sever himself from all that surrounds him, orienting himself towards a new vision. This perspective is expressed in the continuation of that call – “and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you” – expressing a long-term vision, perhaps thousands of years into the future. The addition of Lot in this verse is a sort of testimony to his going in the essential sense. The latter verse adopts a perspective that is closer and more immediate, with a description of the order in which the camp is organized. Here, Lot is counted as part of the family; he appears on the list after Sarah, Avraham’s wife, and both are followed by mention of the property.

This might explain the relationship between the two descriptions. On the inner, essential level, the initiative of going along with Avraham comes from Lot, who chooses to join himself to this journey. On the practical level, the camp is Avraham’s camp; it is he who decides how it will be conducted.

The Torah goes on to describe Avraham’s journey in the land, his going down to Egypt, his return, and more journeys. Only then does the text return to Lot. In between, there has been no mention of him – a hint to his lack of dominance during this period.

Avraham’s Way

And Avram passed in the land to the place of Shekhem, to Alon Moreh, and the Canaanites were then in the land. (12:6)

This verse introduces the descriptions of Avraham’s journeys in the land. The choice of the expression “passed in” (*va-ya’avor*) seeks to depict him as passing from one place to the next, like a tourist who has no fixed location. This situation is explained by the second part of the verse: “And the Canaanites were then in the land.” There are permanent residents of the land, and therefore Avraham’s status will remain that of someone passing through, not someone who reaches a place and stays there. “To the place of Shekhem” – Avraham does not enter the city, but rather encamps at its outskirts.

And God appeared to Avram and He said, “To your seed shall I give this land.” And he built there an altar to God, who had appeared to him. (12:7)

It is interesting and significant to note that God’s promise concerning the land of Canaan is made to Avraham’s descendants, and not to Avraham himself. This fact is related to his position as one “passing” in the land and the noting that “the Canaanites were then in the land.” In Shekhem, he will build an altar and then immediately take up his journey again:

And he removed from there to a mountain on the east of Beit-El and pitched his tent, having Beit-El on the west and Ai on the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord, and called in the Name of the Lord. (12:8)

A third point, easily overlooked, is that Avraham pitches his tent on the road between Beit-El and Ai, in the manner of someone who does not belong to the place.⁴

And Avram journeyed on, continuing towards the Negev. (9)

Once again, he adopts the position of a nomad, “journeying on, continuing.” What is the meaning of all of this?

We began by describing the spiritual position that Avraham is invited to adopt, entailing severance from his natural life-circles in favor of the elevated position of a sort of father-figure. We now start noticing signs of this new situation. In contrast to the simple nature of a person that causes him to bond with the land via a certain place that is his fixed abode, Avraham approaches the land in its entirety. He moves from place to place, knowing that the land will belong to his descendants, not to himself, yet not perceiving this as any disadvantage. Later, God will tell him, “Arise, walk through the land by its length and by its breadth, for to you shall I give it” (13:17). It is in this abstract manner that Avraham develops his profound connection with the land promised to his descendants.

How does Lot respond to this nomadism? Did he understand at the outset that this is how things would be? Throughout the verses cited above, mention is made only of Avraham; nothing is said of Lot. At the end of this period, he makes an appearance, “has his say,” as it were. It then becomes clear retroactively that something was going on beneath the surface throughout this time.

And Avram went up out of Egypt – he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the Negev. (14:1)

At the outset of the journey, the camp is listed as follows: Avraham takes Sarah, Lot, and then – finally – the “substance” belonging to all of them. Now, two separate circles are described: Avraham, his wife, and all that is his, on one hand, and then – separately – Lot. This is an early sign of the fissure that is developing between him and Avraham.⁵

4 In contrast to Shekhem, where Avram built an altar, here he calls in God’s Name – a sort of initial involvement in the space.

5 We might also compare this to the structure of the camp even earlier, when it was led by Terach: “And Terach took Avram his son; and Lot, son of Haran – his son’s son; and Sarai, his daughter-in-law, wife of Avram, his son” (11:31). Here, the first circle contains Avraham, Terach’s son. The second circle contains Lot, his grandson. The third circle contains Sarai, his daughter-in-law. The fact that Lot is given precedence over Sarai is related to the fact that the leader of the camp is Terach; it is he, not Avraham, who is the head of the family. Avraham is listed here as someone who is taken along; he is not the active party.

“And They Could Not Dwell Together”

And Avram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold... And Lot also, who went with Avram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. (13:3, 5)

The text describes Avraham and Lot and their respective multitudes of possessions. Both are very wealthy. On the physical level, their situations appear very similar, but the difference in formulation tells two different stories. Avraham has “*mikneh*” (literally, “cattle”), embodying “*kinyan*” (possession). “Silver and gold” similarly denote liquid assets, a position of control, the ability to acquire. Lot, in contrast, has “flocks and herds and tents.” Flocks and herds are fixed assets; they do not denote control, and they are not liquid. Tents, too, signify the existential need to dwell somewhere. Avraham is headed for a nomadic existence, looking to the long term; Lot, in contrast, is focused on the present.⁶

And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together, for their substance was great, such that they could not dwell together. (14:6)

There is a tension that exists between Avraham and Lot even before the shepherds enter the picture. The land, the living space in the broader sense, has not elevated them to a sufficiently high level where they might join worlds and dwell together.⁷ The context of the quarrel – “their substance was great” – is an expression of the inability of the land to cause them to transcend themselves and dwell together.

And there was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle; and the Cana’ani and the Perizzi dwelled then in the land. (14:7)

Only as a second stage do the shepherds make an appearance. What is the subject of their quarrel? This is not stated explicitly, but the continuation of the verse creates the context: the Cana’ani and the Perizzi are dwelling in the land. Avraham, as noted, is acutely cognizant of this fact (regarding 12:6, we noted this as the reason for his not settling in any one place), which is now the focus of the quarrel. The *midrash* sketches the fairly predictable outcome of the divergent views: Avraham’s herdsmen follow his example and show respect for the Canaanite ownership of the land, while Lot’s herdsmen see no problem with using the fields to graze their cattle:

“And there was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram’s cattle and the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle” – R. Berakhia said in the name of R. Yehuda son of Simon: Avraham’s livestock would go out muzzled,

6 In addition, the plural “tents” (*ohalim*) is concrete, while the descriptions regarding Avraham, formulated in the singular, are conceptual and more abstract.

7 To explain the metaphor of the land “lifting” them: The land that both of them have come to inherit is perceived differently by each of them. The land is a common denominator that could have elevated them, but has not succeed in fulfilling its destiny and lifting them to that level.

while Lot's livestock did not go out muzzled. Avraham's shepherds would say to them, "Is theft then permitted?" Lot's herdsmen said to them, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Avraham, 'To your seed shall I give this land.' But Avraham is childless; he will die, and then Lot, his nephew, will inherit him. So his livestock are eating of what will ultimately be his." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, "This is what I said to him. 'To your seed shall I give [this land]' – when? When the seven nations are uprooted from it. 'And the Kena'ani and the Perizzi dwelled then in the land' – yet they already seek their rights in the land?" (*Bereishit Rabba, Parshat Lekh-lekha* 41)

According to the *midrash*, Lot's herdsmen offer two arguments. The first concerns their rights in the present: "The land will soon be ours, so we may as well start enjoying its benefits right now." Moreover, they claim that their right is an exclusive one: Avraham has no son, and so when he dies, Lot will be his sole heir.

God's response to them is that the promise "to your seed shall I give this land" is meant for a time when the seven nations are uprooted from the land. The bequest will be sometime in the future. For now, "the Cana'ani and the Perizzi dwelled in the land." For now, they still have rights over the land.

Not only does Lot see himself as part of the Divine promise; he also sees Avraham's portion as passing to himself, and he has no patience to wait. But God insists that the seven nations are still dwelling in the land, and there is no license to steal from them.

The Difference Between Lot and Avraham

God tells Avraham, "Take yourself from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you." Lot hears this and decides to go along, joining in the journey like a regular member of the camp. Avraham arrives in the land and God tells him, "To your seed shall I give this land" (13:7). "To your seed" – not to you personally. What this means is that Avraham will be wandering about in the land, moving from place to place; there will be nowhere that belongs to him, no piece of land where he can lay his head. Avraham is present in the land only in the most general sense; he moves from place to place, builds altars, calls in God's Name: "And Avram journeyed on, continuing towards the Negev." Later on we read, "And he went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Beit El, to the place where his tent had been at the outset, between Beit El and Ai" (13:3). The Cana'ani are still in the land, and Avraham uproots himself and pitches his tent anew, dwelling between two cities – not in either one of them.

All of this demonstrates the extent to which Avraham is not really part of the "here and now." His position is one that adopts a broader perspective, standing before God and regarding the land – in its abstract entirety – in a conceptual way, not truly involved in the physical, concrete reality.

But what of Lot? This is not what Lot had had in mind. Lot had sought

to join in the journey, and Avraham had agreed. But after one move, and then another, and another, he begins to grasp what is entailed in accompanying Avraham, and he wants to break away. He wants to dwell in one place, to have an actual hold on the land. Soon, he will abandon this place, too, following his heart to Sedom and its environs.

In summary, we introduced our discussion by describing Avraham as being called upon by God to adopt a new spiritual position with regard to reality. In the language of the Sages: “And he told Avraham the Hebrew (*ha-ivri*)...’ (14:13) – R. Yehuda said, All the world was on one side (*me’ever echad*), while he was on the other side...” (*Bereishit Rabba, Lekh-Lekha 41*). This position was something like a fatherly attitude towards children. Thus, Avraham leaves the life circles in which he is ensconced and emerges to adopt a position that observes it all from on high, from a position raised above the here and now. An expression of this is to be found in his abstract attitude towards the land; in his attitude towards the Canaanites – the patience and honor that he shows them, taking care not to push them out of their place; his patience and containment of Lot, allowing him to join him; and – later on – his offer to divide the land (if Lot takes the north, Avraham will take the south, and vice versa). All of this is a clue to recognizing the spiritual position that Avraham has adopted, as well as a clue to his character and qualities.

Some further illustrations of his broad, inclusive approach: he sets out at the age of 75, with all his accumulated experience and perspective; he goes out to wage war against the five kings, displaying self-confidence and decision-making ability when others are lacking in it; the ability to accept Sedom, although its spiritual position is so far from his own. Avraham is not threatened; before Sara puts her demand to him and it is validated by God, he views Yishmael as his successor no less than Yitzchak will be. Sara sees the situation for what it is, while Avraham inhabits a higher plane. Avraham also forges a covenant with Avimelekh and promises his place in the land. In episode after episode, we view this recurring picture, which might best be captured by the prophetic description:

Look to Avraham, your father, and to Sara, who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, and I blessed him, and increased him. (*Yeshayahu 51:2*).

Translated by Kaeren Fish