

THINGS START WITH AN ARGUMENT, AND THEY GO DOWNHILL FROM THERE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The pasuk [verse] in this week's parsha says, "And also with Lot who accompanied Avraham there was flock and cattle and tents" [Bereishis 13:5]. Rashi explains that through his association with the Patriarch Avraham, Lot was also blessed with great wealth. But the Torah continues "And the land was not able to bear them that they might dwell together; for their substance was great so that they could not dwell together." [ibid. 13:6]

This last pasuk apparently contains a glaring redundancy. The fact that the land was not big enough for both of them is mentioned both at the start and the end of the pasuk! What is the repetition teaching us? The Shemen HaTov provides us with a very true insight:

There was a two-stage development here. First because of the abundance of cattle each owned, they got into a dispute regarding grazing rights. As a result of this dispute "they were unable to live together". This is the nature of arguments. There may be valid and understandable reasons for the original dispute. But once people begin to argue, the reason why they started arguing might almost become immaterial. They will eventually get to the point where each party cannot stand to be in the presence of the other.

This is exactly what the pasuk is telling us. It started out as a fight over grazing rights. Ostensibly, the fight began because there was not enough room. But once they began to argue over grazing rights, the argument escalated. Things got out of hand. The parties got to a point where it did not matter anymore why they started arguing. Simply, "they could not dwell together" anymore!

We see the same idea in Parshas Toldos when Yitzchak's shepherds fought with the shepherds in Gerar [Bereishis 26: 19-22]. Each side claimed: "The water is ours". Therefore they called the name of the well Striving (Esek) because they fought over it (hisasku imo). Then they dug another well and they fought over it as well. They called the second well 'Conflict' (Sitnah). By the second well, the Torah already does not state the reason for the fight; it merely states they called the name of the well 'Sitnah'. The idea is exactly as we said before. Initially, the conflict was over water rights, but once the controversy took place, then the people could not stand each other anymore. By the second well, they were prepared to argue with one another for no reason at all.

Cashing In On The Legacy Of Our Father Avraham

Parshas Lech Lecha features the famous war between the five kings and the four kings -- the first world war in the history of mankind. It is ironic that Avraham -- the first Jew -- is caught up right in the middle of this first world war. This is just one more instance of "The actions of the Fathers foreshadow events that befell their descendants" (ma'aseh Avos siman l'banim). Many of the wars that happen in this world, indirectly, if not directly, impact the Jewish people.

Eventually, the four kings were victorious and they defeated the five kings. A refugee from the war (according to Chazal this was Og, the future King of Bashan) escaped and told Avraham that his nephew Lot was captured. Avraham gathered his men and went to wage battle with the four kings. In describing this event, the pasuk states that the refugee came and spoke with "Avram the Hebrew" (ha'Ivri). Although Avram is sometimes referred to by this title, we do not find it attached to his name in most of the places that describe the major events of his lifetime. Why does the Torah use this term at this time?

Rashi explains that this refugee, Og, was not such a Good Samaritan. He was not really all interested in the welfare of Lot. The Medrash states that he had eyes on Avram's wife Sarah. He figured that if he could get Avram to do battle with the mighty army of the victorious four kings, it would be a sure way to get rid of him once and for all. He saw this as the perfect plan to allow him to marry Sarah.

This was a very legitimate fear. Why, in fact, did Avram risk his life and the life of his men to save Lot? The Medrash tells us that Lot looked exactly like his uncle, Avram. Avram was afraid that the four kings would claim NOT that they captured Lot, but that they captured Avram himself -- Avram the Hebrew, Avram the Jew, the one who tells us to believe in the existence of G-d and tells us to negate our allegiance to all our idols!

The battle was not merely one to recapture Lot, a single individual. Avram took arms to engage in a theological war. He risked his life and those of his men to avoid the disgrace of allowing the four kings to claim a major coup of having captured their arch enemy -- the chief priest of monotheistic belief in the world. Avram needed to prevent this great desecration of G-d's Name. The Honor of Heaven was at stake!

For this reason, he is emphatically identified as Avram the Hebrew on this occasion. This title represented his strength of character to stand on one side of the river (Ever echad), aligned in battle against the entire world on the other side of that river.

Everything that happened to the fathers will happen to the children. The fact that people are martyrs -- the fact that there have been thousands if not tens of thousands of Jews, very simple Jews, who over the generations stood up to vastly superior forces, willing to give up their lives for Sanctification of G-d's Name, all stems from the heroic courage demonstrated by Avram in this Parsha on this occasion. This is all the legacy of Avram Ha'Ivri -- our Patriarch Avraham the first Jew.

Likewise, the fact that there are Jews who give up so much to live in Eretz Yisrael, is because they are following the courageous journey alluded to in the opening pasukim of our Parsha -- Lech Lecha

m'Artzecha u'm'moladetecha (You go away from your homeland and from your birth place). All the sacrifices that we see Jews are capable of is a fulfillment of ma'aseh Avos Siman l'Banim and is an example of our cashing in on the spiritual legacy of our patriarch.

Rav Shimon Schwab's first rabbinical position was in Bavaria, Germany when he was 25 years old, in 1933. On Parshas Ki Sisa, he gave a sermon to his congregation trying to explain the sin of the Golden Calf. He quoted an interpretation from Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch that the Calf was not really an idol -- it was only supposed to be a medium between the Jewish people and the Almighty. The word in German for "medium" is mitler (go-between). He said something to the effect that "Jews don't need to have a go-between (mitler)." There was an informer present in the congregation and he reported to the Gestapo that in his sermon, Rav Schwab stated: "Jews don't need to have Hitler."

This happened right after Adolph Hitler was proclaimed Chancellor of Germany. The Gestapo called Rav Schwab on the carpet to explain himself. Rav Schwab brought in the German commentary of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on which he based his sermon and showed the Gestapo that he was misquoted. However, the Gestapo told him that he was not off the hook so easily. Once he was placed on a blacklist, he would have to be investigated. He was advised to call back the following week to find out the outcome of the investigation.

Rav Schwab kept calling back each week for two months, always being told "call back next week". Finally, a couple of months later, a person answering the phone yelled at him, "You Jew! Why do you keep calling me, don't you know the matter is taken care of already!"

Rav Schwab understood that the person was trying to tell him that the matter was taken care of, but he could not say it politely because others were listening so he gave him the message in this rude fashion. At any rate, Rav Schwab later said that for those two months, when he was left in limbo, uncertain if he would be arrested or not by the Gestapo, whenever he went to sleep at night, he slept in his clothes. He did not put on his pajamas.

Why? He had heard of an acquaintance who was accused by the Gestapo of subversive activities and was taken out in the middle of the night, executed, and hung in his pajamas. Rav Schwab said he was afraid that he too would be arrested in the middle of the night and be hung in his pajamas. He was afraid that it would be a Chillul Hashem that a Rav would be hanging publicly in his pajamas. To avoid that desecration of G-d's Name, he slept in his clothes for two months so that even if he would be killed, at least it would not be a Chillul Hashem.

Where does one get such strength of character and concern for Divine Honor? It comes from the reaction of Avraham Halvri to the message brought to him by the refugee from the War of the Four vs. Five Kings. Avraham risked his life because Lot looked like him and it would be a Chillul Hashem to have people think that Avram was captured. That strength allowed his descendant to think "lest they hang me in my pajamas."

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter

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