

DON'T DOUBT MY G-D

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Lech Lecha

Don't Doubt My G-d

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD# 874 Saving A Soul - How Far Must You Go? Good Shabbos!

Shortly after Avram came to the Land of Canaan, he needed to descend to Egypt "because the famine was intense in the Land" [Bereshis 12:10]. In Egypt, Sarai was forcibly taken in the palace of Pharaoh. Finally, Sara is released, the famine passes, and Avram began his return trip back to Canaan.

"So Avram went up from Egypt, he with his wife and all that was his - and Lot with him - to the south. Now Avram was very laden with livestock, silver, and gold. He proceeded on his journeys from the south to Beth-el to the place where his tent had been at first, between Beth-el and Ai." [Bereshis 13:1-3]

Rashi quotes the Rabbinic teaching that on his return trip, Avram made a point of staying at the same places where he stayed on his way down to Egypt. This teaches proper etiquette that one should not change his lodgings where he has received hospitality [Eruchin 16b].

I know of a contemporary application of this Talmudic teaching. Rav Elya Svei ZT'L and YB'L Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky of the Philadelphia Yeshiva used to travel to Toronto to raise funds for their Yeshiva. In spite of the fact that they later had children who lived in Toronto, they still stayed in the home of the same supporter who provided lodging for them in the city before they had their own married children living there.

The Oznaim L'Torah by Rav Zalman Sorotzkin says that in the case of Avram Avinu, there was an added reason for him to go back to the same places where he stayed on his way down to Egypt.

Avram was promised that going to Eretz Yisrael was going to be a windfall for him. "I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing, etc." Spiritually, financially and economically, good would come out of it.

However, ten pasukim later, "there was a great famine in the land". Avram needed to descend to Egypt "for the famine was severe in the land." Within a relatively short time of arrival, Avrum became so destitute that he needed to flee Eretz Yisrael because he and his family were starving. This development had the potential to create a terrible desecration of G-d's Name (chilul haShem): "Where is this G-d of yours? What happened to all these promises?"

Avrum wanted to make sure that people were not left with the impression that Hashem did not fulfill His promises. Now that Avrum was coming back "laden with livestock, silver, and gold," he wanted to make sure he stopped at all the same lodgings where people might have been skeptical about the fulfillment of G-d's blessings to Avrum as Avrum was leaving the Land of Canaan. Avrum wanted to make sure that the people would not doubt G-d's promises. Yes, there may have been a temporary "bump in the road." That is the way life is sometimes. That is part of the 'nisyonos' [tests] we must sometimes endure. Ultimately, however, we should have rock solid faith in Hashem's Promises and Blessings.

The Kesav Sofer offers a somewhat different interpretation as to why it was so important for Avram Avinu to come back to the same places. Unfortunately, many times in life, when people are starting their careers and they are "just getting by," they associate with a certain type of people. As they become more successful, they forget who their friends were 'then' and those same people who were good enough for them 'then' are no longer good enough for them 'now' in their higher station in life.

This is equivalent to someone who stayed in Motel Sixes early in life and then, after hitting the jackpot, stays in the Ritz-Carltons and the Four Seasons of the world. This is a lack of "hakaras hatov" [gratitude] to Motel Six. Now the truth is that a person does not owe anything to Motel Six (and Tom Bodet) just because they may have left the light on for them once or twice. However, in the case of Avram, the situation was different: When he went down to Egypt and stayed in all these houses of people who were willing to take in a family that was down on its luck. They did him a favor. Now that Avram and his family are coming back as wealthy aristocrats, it would be inappropriate for them to turn their noses up and refuse to stay in the humble quarters of their original hosts. We are not talking about commercial hotels. We are talking about people's houses and people's feelings.

Many times, I have mentioned that virtually every parsha in the Torah teaches us the lesson of "hakaras hatov" [gratitude]. Hakaras hatov is such a fundamental aspect of Judaism that allusions to it are scattered throughout the Torah. This is one such example. The reason Avram felt compelled to go back to the same people and the same lodgings on his return from Egypt as a wealthy man as he did when he went down to Egypt as a poor man is to teach a lesson. "If you were good enough for me when I was poor, you are good enough for me when I am rich." A person with such an attitude is a person who possesses the character trait of "hakaras hatov".

It Is Not Easy To Fight For The Sake Of Heaven

The Biblical narration continues. Lot also became wealthy. However, there developed a rift between the shepherds of Avram and the shepherds of Lot. They were unable to dwell together on the same piece of land.

Rashi explains the nature of the quarrel. Lot's shepherds were wicked and would graze their cattle in the fields of others. Avram's shepherds rebuked them over the theft they committed by grazing their cattle on other people's land. Lot's shepherds argued back that Avram was promised the land and that since Avram had no children, his nephew Lot was in line to inherit his land. Thus, they were not really stealing when they grazed their cattle on fields that would eventually be theirs.

One could thus argue that the dispute between the shepherds was an "argument for the sake of Heaven." Each side in the dispute seems to have had a reasonable claim. In fact, Rav Dessler points out based on a Sifrei in Sefer Devorim that Scripture, in a sense, faults Avram Avinu for the fact that because of this fight, Lot separated from him.

The Sifrei writes on the pasuk "When there will be a fight between people..." [Devorim 25:1] - that Shalom [peace] does not emerge from Merivah [fighting] and that what caused Lot to separate from the Tzaddik Avram was the fight between their shepherds. Rav Dessler sees in this Chazal a subtle complaint against our Patriarch Avram that he let things get out of hand, to the extent that Lot had to leave his presence and influence.

However, was this not the right thing to do? Was this not an 'argument for the sake of Heaven'? Did Avram's shepherds not appropriately chastise Lot's shepherds because they were transgressing the prohibition against theft?

Rav Dessler answers that this is a classic example of a dispute that may start out for the right reasons but which rapidly devolves into a dispute over personal issues. This is a tremendous risk with any machlokes [dispute]. There are indeed disputes that start out "l'shem shamayim" [for the sake of Heaven], as matters of principle. Unfortunately, all too often, the "matter of principle" becomes a "matter of personal". This is the danger of any dispute. This is the nature of people - they get involved, it becomes personal, and then the argument, which started out as a pristine argument on principle, deteriorates into an ugly personal dispute - far more base and illegitimate than the original "argument l'shem shamayim".

The Talmud teaches [Brochos 28b]: Shimon haPekulei arranged the 18 brachos [blessings] (of "Shmoneh Esrei") in front of Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh. Rabban Gamliel asked if there was someone there who could formulate a nineteenth bracha, which would pray for protection from the heretics. Shmuel HaKatan [the "small one"] arose and enacted the bracha of "For the slanderers let there be no hope..." (v'LaMalshinim al te'hay tikvah...). The Talmud says that Shmuel haKatan was the only person fit to coin this bracha.

Obviously, Shimeon haPekulei was good at liturgy. What was the problem with him composing the nineteenth blessing as well? Why was Rabban Gamliel in doubt whether he would be able to find anyone present capable of formulating that blessing against the heretics? What was the problem?

Rav Meshulum Roth explains that the "Bikras HaMinim" [blessing against heretics] is a different type of "blessing" than the rest of Shmoneh Esrei. It is more of a "curse" than a "blessing". It invokes dispute, calling for the loss of all hope for and destruction of the evil doers in our midst. The "bracha" calls for eradication and vengeance.

To compose such a bracha, one needs a person who does everything entirely for the sake of Heaven. It required Shmuel HaKatan. It is ironic that Shmuel HaKatan is also the author of one Mishna in Tractate Avos [4:24], in which he says "When your foe falls, do not be glad, and when he stumbles, your heart should not rejoice; lest Hashem see and it be displeasing in His eyes and He turn His anger from him (to you)." [Mishlei 24:17-18] Shmuel HaKatan's contribution to the Mishna is to quote the above two pasukim from the Book of Proverbs.

One must ask what is Shmuel HaKatan adding to the body of Mishnaic literature by just quoting pasukim that Shlomo HaMelech had written in Kesuvim hundreds of years earlier? It would be akin to my getting up and quoting pasukim from the Chumash as my shiur here this evening and then sitting down with no elaboration whatsoever. Yasher Koach! What was Shmuel HaKatan teaching us that we did not know already from reading Mishlei?

The answer is that this pasuk was Shmuel HaKatan's essence. "When your enemy stumbles, do not rejoice" was his mantra in life. He was a man of peace. When he had to get involved in a dispute, it was 100% for the sake of Heaven without one iota of personal subjectivity involved. That is why his entire legacy in life was these two pasukim from Mishlei.

Therefore, when Rabban Gamliel needed a Bracha that called for eradicating people, he could not just turn to anyone to come up with that blessing. He needed Shmuel HaKatan to enact the bracha of the heretics.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Lech Lecha are provided below:

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