

# PARSHAS LECH LECHA - NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## **No Justice, No Peace<sup>1</sup>**

The king of Sodom want out to meet him after his return from defeating Kedala'omer...at the Valley of Shaveh...Malki-tzedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine. He was a priest of G-d the Most High.

The two kings could not have been more different. Perhaps that is the whole idea.

The king of Sodom is quite clueless about his humiliation. He owed his life and his kingdom to Avraham, to whom he had rendered no assistance. Avraham had triumphed on the battlefield with his band of ragtag irregulars, while the Royal Sodom Legionnaires had been trounced. Were he conscious of his sorry state, he would have had to come begging to Avraham, his frame bent over, and with averted eyes. He did beg - but as an equal. He asked Avraham to honor his collegial request as a professional courtesy. You know, the kind of things rulers do for each other. The king's personal debasement didn't figure. What mattered was that he was still a monarch, still royalty, and failures don't really count. The pitiable monarch met with the hugely successful Avraham - and insisted that they were equals. Thus, they met in the Valley of Shaveh, which means "equal."

To the king of Sodom, nothing mattered so much as the station and rank of his monarchical privilege. Completely dependent upon Avraham, he did not even think of coming to him with a tribute or gift, let alone something practical, like food and drink for Avraham's famished soldiers. Kings can't be expected to involve themselves in pedestrians concerns like that..

Malki-tzedek, king of Shalem, downplayed the trappings of external majesty, in favor of the inner majesty of regal and sterling character. He owed nothing to Avraham, and sought nothing from him. Nonetheless, he understood that food might be needed and appreciated, and so he brought it.

The difference between them is indicated in the pasuk. Malki-tzedek served "G-d, the Most High." Serving G-d made the difference between the emperor with no clothes and the one who reflected Divinity.

We would think that these two personalities are entirely incompatible. That was not the case, however, in the ancient pagan world, in which many deities were acknowledged and served by choice, like items in a Chinese menu. To his contemporaries, Malki-tzedek served one particular G-d, albeit the most elevated of them. They may have understood that peace emanated from Shalem,

and that it was achieved only because it was joined with justice/ tzedek. Such a combination appealed to some people - but there were other gods available who could be served in very different ways. The god of licentiousness could be served through moral license and abandon; the god of war loved large body counts. Serving them was much more...convenient.

With so many gods available, it was a spiritual buyer's market. The effect of this was to box in the qualities that Malki-tzedek represented. His G-d held sway in His small neighborhood - but had no great influence elsewhere. In Shalem, one propitiated the Deity by working for justice; elsewhere, you served the local deity through whatever struck that god's fancy. The king of Sodom, for all we know, served a god of egotistic arrogance and pompous ceremony. The king may have been as dedicated a servant of his lord as Malki-tzedek was to his.

The effect of such polytheism was to leave room for Malki-tzedek's G-d - even to see Him as the chief among many - but to circumscribe His influence. People in those days could even comprehend that this highest of gods demanded justice and a righteous life, but consigned Him to a small sphere of influence. He may have been the highest god, but he didn't get the highest ratings. The G-d of Malki-tzedek brought the blessings of peace to devotees of justice - but only to a small group of people, living in a particular area. The Jewish people would champion these same values of justice and peace, and understand their co-dependency. They, however, would insist that these become the legacy of the entire world. Jews would not be satisfied with keeping His gifts restricted to a narrow application. They would not rest until He would become the object of veneration of all of humanity, and His words would become its guiding principles.

In the many centuries that followed Malki-tzedek, his tradition was kept alive in his city, Yeru-Shalem. The values of justice and peace were cherished and kept in trust for the rest of humanity. It is perfectly understandable that centuries later, when addressing Dovid, the new king of Shalem, HKBH would remind him of an earlier possessor of the same title. "Hashem has sworn:...You will be a priest forever, on the order of Malki-tzedek." Your commission is to propagate the ideals that were first advanced by that ancient king, who also acted as a priest in the service of Hashem.

It is a commission we still cherish today.

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1. Tehilim 110:4

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