

## Betwixt and Between – Lech Lecha

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles  
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

At the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha, Hashem commands Avraham to leave everything behind and go to the land He will show him. Avraham unquestioningly complies. He also takes his nephew Lot with him, only to part ways with him later on. Why did Avraham take Lot with him and then separate from him later?

Some say that Avraham felt obligated to take bring Lot with him because he saw that the Messiah would come from his descendants, Ruth and Naamah. He also felt a sense of responsibility to his orphaned nephew.

According to the Medrash, Haran, Lot's father, had died when he jumped into Nimrod's fiery furnace, expecting to emerge alive as Avraham had. An analysis of Haran's action will undoubtedly reveal his impact on Lot's mindset. When faced with a choice, one generally has two options. He can embrace one path or distance himself from it. Rav Schwadron posits that Haran introduced a third choice, the option to wait and see. This was how Haran approached his commitment to Hashem. If Avraham would emerge safe from Nimrod's furnace, Haran would declare his faith in the God of Avraham. If Avraham would die in the flames, he would declare himself to believe in the gods of Nimrod. His lack of faith doomed him.

Rav Schwadron points out that throughout his travels with Avraham, Lot always goes *eemo*, in close association with him, walking in a similar spiritual path. He learned from his uncle and did in fact keep many of the *mitzvot* on his own, even in Sodom. In many ways, he was a *tzadik*. As the Peninei Daas points out, Lot put himself in tremendous danger to bring

strangers into his home. According to the Medrash, his daughter died a horrible death for the crime of daring to perform *chesed* for a stranger. The lessons that Lot learned in his uncle's house accompanied him to Sodom and were passed to his children. So what was it that so changed him?

When they left Egypt, both Avraham and Lot were very wealthy. Lot is recorded as going es Avraham, with him, but merely physically. He found loopholes to indulge in his wealth. While Avraham muzzled his animals so they would not graze in strangers' fields, Lot was not so circumspect. He allows his herds to graze anywhere, rationalizing that the land would eventually be his anyway, as Hashem had promised it to Avraham who had no other heirs. *Chochma Umussar* points to this quarrel among the shepherds as the turning point for Avraham to question Lot's true commitment to Torah. Avraham approached Lot with the shepherds' conflict as his pretext. "We cannot live together," he said, "Let us separate." Lot could have insisted on staying with his mentor. But the fertile plains of Sedom enticed him so much that he did not care what kind of people he would be living amongst. He became so influenced by his surroundings that he ended up committing incest. Avraham understood that total commitment to God's wishes and commands cannot coexist with a commitment based on expedience. A Torah true Jew does not look for loopholes and exigencies at every turn. Rather his practice of Judaism is based on love and joy. And so Avraham separated himself from Lot.

Why did Avraham not realize Lot's lack of commitment earlier? Avraham may have suspected as much, but as long as Lot was in

Avraham's household, Lot would not disrespect Avraham by acting inappropriately in his house. So while Lot continued to live a "Jewish" life in Avraham's house, he nevertheless did not work on improving his character. He took with him the mindset of expedience from his father, and the love of wealth. Therefore, Rav Schwadron points out, our sages say, "*Sur mei'ra vaaseh tov*," first one must focus on leaving one's evil ways and only then can one truly accomplish good. Lot continued doing *chessed*, he even served *Pesach matzo* to his guests, but he had never worked on himself, and so he was easy prey to the influence of his surroundings. It is not so difficult, says Rav Lugassi, to do many *mitzvot*; what is much more difficult is to uproot one's negative characteristics so that one's inner life reflects the values of Hashem.

Rabbi Friefeld notes the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is external. When one utilizes that knowledge and internalizes it, he gains understanding and wisdom. This was the difference between Lot (and his father Haran) and Avraham.

We are all witness to the wonders of nature and to small and large miracles every day. But how many of us can take this knowledge and wonder and use it to transform our inner selves to reflect its truths? Avraham became one with his knowledge, while Lot observed and continued to vacillate. Hashem wants our hearts, not our rote observance. When we worship Hashem with our heart, we begin to change our character, to uproot those negative traits within ourselves so that the good we do will remain. When we truly commit ourselves to Him, He shines His light upon us to help us on our chosen path.

## Unchanging Morality

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoah Teller

How does one become an honorable person, a man of moral character? It all rests on belief in Hashem. If a person doesn't believe, then his idea of morality will be relative. What he considers right may not be what someone else considers right. Throughout history, nations have committed murder and wreaked havoc and mayhem thinking their actions were correct. A Jew is bound by the rules of Hashem. In Dostoevsky's book, *The Brothers*

Karimasa, he writes, If there is no Almighty, then all is permitted. It's simple cause and effect. If a person doesn't believe in a Higher Authority and thinks there's nothing greater than man, then what can objective morality be based on?

The most famous line in the Declaration of Independence is, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and

are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that these truths are anything but self-evident. They have been repeatedly denied by almost all societies throughout history. They are only obvious to someone steeped in Torah. The French and Russian revolution may have been inspired by secular utopia but they ended in bloodshed and the suppression of human

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rights.

There are times that morality and reason work hand in hand and there are times that they don't. During the Holocaust, it was moral but not reasonable to save the life of a Jew and risk your own life. Those who did it, did it because it was moral not reasonable. Reason can be an indispensable tool in helping people to do good, but it can also be used for evil. The Nazis used their reason to commit heinous crimes. An intelligent adversary is

worse than an unintelligent adversary. There could be no better example than Goebels, the German Minister of Propaganda, who used every form of reason to dupe people into doing things that were thoroughly immoral.

The Nefesh Hachaim says that man's purpose on this world is to do good for others. According to the Biblical and Rabbinic vision, Hashem's primary demand is that people act in an ethical way. It's not a matter of opinion. Everyone must do what He commanded. He

expects us to act in a moral manner. Anything less than that violates His will. What about the murderous way in which religious fanatics such as the Crusaders, Inquisitors, Hamas acted? Their behavior only demonstrates that belief in Hashem is not enough. Rituals without morality can easily be corrupted. Karl Marx, the father of Communism believed like Nietzsche, the Father of German philosophy, that morality should be determined by humans, not Hashem. History has proven them wrong.

## The Steipler: A Giant Among Men

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoach Teller

The Steipler was born in Hornosteipel, a small town in Russia. His father, Rav Chaim Peretz, lost his wife at a young age. When he began contemplating remarriage, he was offered two prospects. One was a girl from a wealthy family who would enable him to learn without worries. The other was a righteous woman from a poor family. In the Ukraine, it was terribly difficult to make ends meet. There was almost no doubt in Rav Chaim Peretz's mind which of the two he would marry. But just to be sure he went to the Hornsteipler Rebbe to ask for his blessing. The Rebbe advised him to marry the poor virtuous woman. He promised that they would have a child who would light up the world with his Torah.

The Steipler was orphaned at a young age from his father. He would sit for long hours alone in the *beit midrash* and study Torah. His companions were his *sefarim* and his notebooks. At the age of 11, a recruiter for the Novardak *yeshiva* found him and took him back to the *yeshiva*. Sometimes a seeming tragedy is really a blessing in disguise. Because the Steipler didn't have a father, he was adopted by the Novardok *yeshiva* which helped shaped him into the great leader he became.

When the Alter of Novardak decided to move the *yeshiva* to Poland, the *yeshiva* hired a guide who knew the border patrols well and could lead them to safety. The Steipler's group was divided in two. One group went with the guide while the other group went with his daughter. The Steipler feared that the girl posed a question of *yichud* (prohibition for a

man to be alone with a woman). He refused to go with her and was subsequently caught and drafted into the Red Army.

His stint in the army was remarkable. He was not the typical soldier who followed commands without question. The Steipler answered to a Higher Authority.

How do you become a *gado*? Two minutes at a time. Once he was assigned guard duty Friday night. The guard before him had hung the coat he was supposed to wear on a tree. The Steipler realized it was *muktza*, since taking down the coat would involve moving the tree. He thought, I'm not freezing yet, I can wait another two minutes. And then another two minutes and then another two minutes. All night he stood without the coat in the freezing cold until his guard duty was up.

Once the Steipler violated an army precept so as not to desecrate Shabbat. He was given the punishment of running the gauntlet. Although he suffered unbearable pain, when he thought that it was all a consequence of his desire to keep *Shabbat*, he was filled with satisfaction. When he had to practice shooting on Shabbat he would hold the gun with a *shinui* (irregular way) upside down so as not to violate a Torah prohibition. The army finally concluded they were not the place for him and he was dismissed.

The Steipler published his first sefer, *Daas Tevunos*, anonymously. After the Chazon Ish saw it he was visibly impressed. When he found out that the author was still unmarried, he immediately thought it would be a perfect

match for his sister. He invited the Steipler to come to Vilna. The Steipler would learn a cycle of 20 hours and sleep four hours. But because he would now have to waste time traveling to Lithuania he decided to go two cycles in a row and then sleep on the train. But when he saw the cloth padded train seats, he feared that they contained *shatnez* and he stood the whole way to Vilna.

The Chazon Ish's sister was disconcerted. The fellow had a beard, a long coat, and muddy boots. And to top it off he fell asleep during the date. When she expressed her misgivings to her brother he dismissed them as external. But when he heard that the prospective groom had fallen asleep he began to investigate. When he found out the reason, he was all the more impressed. The couple married and went to live in Pinsk where the Steipler headed the *yeshiva*.

When the Chazon Ish invited the Steipler to join him in Eretz Yisrael, the Steipler immediately complied. During this time period he wrote his classic work *Kehilas Yaakov*. He noted that part of the difficulty of writing the sefer was not just writing the Torah novella but writing with such clarity that everyone could understand it. He did a masterful job. When the Chazon Ish passed away the mantle of leadership naturally passed to the Steipler. The Steipler was clearly endowed with the spirit of Hashem. He was able to see clearly what others could not see. Thousands streamed to his home. With his boundless kindness and prolific Torah wisdom he guided the people until his passing on 23 Av 5745.