

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Lech Lecha
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Lech Lecha – You are what you own

In this week's Parasha of Lech Lecha we read about Avraham's experiences when he moves to the Land of Canaan as Hashem commanded. Avraham travels together with Sarah¹ his wife and his nephew Lot and his family. It is in the Land of Canaan that Avraham achieves greatness and begins to spread his message of monotheism to the world. Though Lot accompanied Avraham on his physical journey, the spiritual journey was a different matter altogether. As we will see in next week's Parasha (when the angels come to Sodom), Lot did succeed in absorbing some of Avraham's trait of hospitality. But his story ends in a shameful way. Why did Lot fail to grow spiritually like Avraham did?

We can see a hint to the answer from a curious pasuk that describes Lot's capture by the four kings in their battle with the five kings.² Lot and Avraham parted ways and Lot was living in the city of Sodom. He found himself caught up in the middle of an epic battle involving nine kings.

And they took Lot and his possessions, the son of Avram's³ brother, and they departed, and he was living in Sodom. (Breishit 14:12)

If we look closely at the wording of this verse, we will notice something very curious. Lot is described as Avraham's nephew, but the verse interposes a mention of Lot's possessions before describing Lot's familial connection to Avraham. It sounds like Lot's possessions are also Avraham's nephew! Why does the Torah phrase it this way? Why didn't the Torah state: "And they took Lot, the son of Avram's brother, and his possessions...". One implication is that Lot was so closely bound to his possessions that they could not be separated. "Lot and his possessions" were one. According to Lot's world view, "you are what you own". (Stay tuned for next week's Darchai Noam where we will B"H analyse an amazing episode that highlights Lot's connection to his property.)

We see a similar description of Lot four pasukim later, but this time the order is reversed:

*And he restored all the possessions, **and also Lot his brother⁴ and his possessions he restored, and also the women and the people.** (Breishit 14:16)*

This pasuk describes Avraham's military success and his redemption of Lot from his captors. It is written from Avraham's perspective. Avraham saw Lot as an individual, separate from his possessions. Avraham had the correct perspective and that may be one explanation as to why he grew spiritually while Lot floundered.

As Avraham's descendants, we need to take this message on board. We are not what we own. Our possessions are tools with which to serve Hashem and to assist us to accomplish what we need to do during our sojourn on this earth. We will not be buried with our possessions (unless we are an Egyptian king who is buried in his tomb with all of his 'stuff'.) Unfortunately, we often spend a lot of time and energy chasing things that we really don't need. Consider the following (based on true stories):

¹ At this time Avraham was called Avram and Sarah was called Sarai.

² I saw this idea in an article by Rabbi Yehoshua Berman, based on an insight of Rabbi Eli Resnick (of the Mir Yeshiva) <https://www.aish.com/tp/i/reflections/280454622.html>.

³ This incident took place before Hashem changed Avraham's name from Avram.

⁴ In this verse, "brother" is used more generally to describe a close relative. See Breishit 20:12 with Rashi's commentary for an interesting discussion that is related to this point.

Amy and Sarah were sharing a taxi on the way back to the office after a meeting.

Amy: "Wow! Is that your new phone?"

Sarah: "Yes! I love it! It's a model 4."

Amy: "A model 4? Why didn't you get the newer model 5 which just came out? It's bigger, it's got more memory and more cool features."

Sarah: "I thought about it, but I decided that I don't really need it."

Amy: "It's not about what you need!"

John was a new solicitor just starting out in a large corporate firm and he was about to be issued with his new laptop. He was updating his boss.

John: "I'm due to get my new laptop next week. They are just waiting for the new models to arrive."

John's boss: "New models? I hope you're not getting a better laptop than mine! I'd better look into this."

The iPhone was first released in 2007 and it was very popular. The partners of the big firms were still using their old firm-issued clunky Blackberries. The following comment was overheard between two partners in the lift: "I can't believe it! My secretary has a better phone than I do. It's so embarrassing."

We often invest a lot of time and effort into obtaining the latest model of something. We need to stop and ask ourselves why? How much do we really need it? Does this new model have a particular feature that will really make our lives better? Are we just doing it for appearance's sake? Perhaps our money and efforts can be better invested elsewhere.

Many of us spend too much of our time and energy on acquiring possessions. This time and energy could be better spent serving Hashem, growing spiritually and doing mitzvot. We need to remember this lesson from Lot's skewed perspective – we only really need a minimum amount to live in reasonable comfort in order to serve Hashem. Each of us must decide what is the appropriate quantity and quality of possessions for our family. However, in judging this matter, we should take into account the fact that most people generally err on the side of presuming that they need more than they actually do.

Most of us like our creature comforts... because they are comfortable. But we should not be turning to our physical possessions to provide us with true comfort. We will never be satisfied with physical possessions. The Midrash⁵ tells us that one who has 100 dollars will want 200. And one who has 200 will want 400. However, the more spiritually strong we are, the more likely we are to turn to Hashem for comfort. When we acquire something materialistic it can give us short-term pleasure. This pleasure can be very alluring. But it inevitably dissipates. When we achieve something spiritually, the pleasure that we get is much more deep-seated and permanent.

We can work on enhancing our spiritual side by valuing and gaining pleasure from spiritual pursuits, for instance moments when we or our children grow in our middot, a new mitzva that we take on, a powerful davening session and remembering to bring Hashem into the picture during our day-to-day experiences.

Let's try something this week:

1. Take an honest look at how much we identify with our possessions.
2. Think about the difference between what we really need and what we just want.
3. Make an effort to value spiritual growth and gain.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ On Kohelet 5:1.