



The Path To Follow LECH LECHA

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Why Be Among the Last?

We know that the Holy One, blessed be He, has promised not to enter the Temple above until the Jewish people have built a Temple below. Therefore as long as we do not improve our deeds, as long as the Temple is not built, Hashem will not enter the Temple above. That being the case, we should ask ourselves a serious question: Why should we be among the last to bring the King into His house? Since everything will eventually be rectified regardless of what we do, why should we be the last ones to rectify our deeds? Each day that we fail to spiritually progress, this question applies to us.

Hence we must all hasten, everyone among us, to uproot the sins of baseless hatred and Lashon Harah, for then the King will immediately enter His house. Whoever hastens to improve himself in these areas acquires great merit, and he will obviously receive a great blessing.

PERFORMING MITZVOT WITH ENTHUSIASM, NOT OUT OF SIMPLE HABIT (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “There was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock.... Abram said to Lot, ‘Please, let there be no strife between me and you.... Please, separate from me. If you go to the left, I will go to the right, and if you go to the right, I will go to the left’” (Genesis 13:7-9). According to our Sages, this dispute revolved around the fact that Abraham’s livestock went out muzzled, while Lot’s livestock did not (Bereshith Rabba 41:5). Lot’s herdsmen were wicked, grazing their livestock in other people’s fields and thereby profiting from theft.

This does not seem to have bothered Lot in any way, and no doubt he even agreed with what they were doing. In fact Lot possessed a love for money, a desire that makes a person become irrational and turns him away from his Creator. Even if we see a tendency towards hospitality in Lot (since he would later invite angels into his home), here Abraham said to him, “Separate from me.” Why did he say this? It is because good and evil were mixed together in Lot, and his proximity to Abraham would have only tarnished the latter’s name. People would have distanced themselves from Abraham instead of drawing closer to him. He would have been unable to bring them under the wings of the Shechinah, and thus the Name of Heaven would have been desecrated. The fact that Lot reached such a low point that good and evil were mixed in him, however, remains difficult to understand. On one hand Lot had a good heart, for he practiced hospitality like Abraham, but on the other hand he acted like a thief, allowing his livestock to graze in the fields of others. Abraham’s reaction is even more surprising, for why didn’t he try and convince Lot to repent? After all, Abraham had such a good influence on people that they repented and recognized Hashem. Therefore why didn’t he try to do the same with Lot, his own nephew?

In the Mishnah we read, “Not study, but practice is the essential thing” (Perkei Avoth 1:17). The Torah also tells us, “Know this day and take it unto your heart” (Deuteronomy 4:39), which means that in order to draw closer to Hashem, it is not enough just to know Torah; we must actually carry it out! We must infuse the knowledge of the Torah deep within our hearts, and we must live with that knowledge. Only in this way can we draw closer to Hashem and become completely spiritual beings.

As for Lot, he initially drew closer to Abraham and was actually quite close to him. He emulated all his deeds and walked in the same path as him. Yet after a certain time, Lot became accustomed to Abraham’s home, and thus the generosity that Lot demonstrated was purely superficial in nature. It did not come from his heart, nor did he put much effort into helping the community or the individual. Thus Lot descended from his initially high level and eventually reached the abyss.

At that point Scripture says of him, “Vegam [And also] Lot, who went with Abram” (Genesis 13:5). The numerical value of vegam is 49, which means that Lot descended all the way to the 49th gate of impurity, for he returned

from Egypt with all of its vices. The Egyptians were immersed in indecency, theft, and other crimes, and Lot learned from them all. Hence at that point it is written: “Who went with Abram,” for Lot had already separated from him completely. Lot was already performing every mitzvah out of habit, to the point that they did not provide him with sufficient merit to be saved from the sins of the inhabitants of Sodom.

We see something similar to this in our own time, when great Torah scholars are careless with regards to Lashon Harah, despite the gravity of this sin. How can this be? It is because they study Halachah only to teach others. With regards to learning it for themselves, they fail to understand it completely and with the utmost clarity. Furthermore, all their learning is superficial, for they study out of habit. They do not learn Halachah in order to put it into practice, to know and internalize it. Since we have reached this point, we can completely understand the questions that were raised earlier. That is, why did Abraham not try and bring his nephew Lot back to the right path, as he had done with so many others in his generation?

It is certain that Abraham tried to encourage Lot to repent, this being hinted at in the verse itself: When Abraham told Lot, “Please, separate from me,” he used the word na (‘please’), which is a request. In other words, Abraham did not express himself in a clear-cut way. He left Lot the possibility to repent and return. In fact if he really wanted to, Lot could have begged Abraham to help him return to the right path.

However Lot failed to do this, for he saw the vast plain of the Jordan, which was extremely lush (Genesis 13:10). He was drawn to the desires and futile pursuits of this world, not with being close to the tzaddikim. Thus he left his uncle Abraham because he preferred to live with the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, and he became completely estranged from Judaism. Thus the Sages say: “‘Lot journeyed mikedem [from the east].’ He removed himself mikadmon [from the Ancient One] of the world, saying: ‘I want neither Abraham nor his G-d.’” (Bereshith Rabba 41:7). Because Lot repudiated the kindnesses of Abraham, he eventually repudiated the kindnesses of Hashem by saying, “I want neither Abraham nor his G-d.” All this happened because Lot did everything out of habit, not from his heart. Therefore even when Abraham left Lot with an opening for repentance, he refused to take it. He neglected this opening and instead rejoiced at the prospect of leaving Abraham and the faith of Israel, and moreover Lot felt superior to Abraham! Thus Lot arrived at an extremely low point. We must all learn from this and realize just how much we need to cleave to the tzaddikim and serve Hashem enthusiastically, not superficially. By doing so, we can all elevate ourselves in the service of Hashem until we reach the 50th gate of holiness.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

A Reward for Eating

It is written, "Leave your land...and I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you...and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you...and in you all families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

If this was a trial for Abraham, why were all these blessings promised to him, since they were liable to drastically diminish his reward?

We can explain this with a story: There were two taxi drivers, one who studied Torah and practiced mitzvot, and another who did not. When they died, their souls were brought to a waiting area for the great Celestial Court, where they related their life experiences to one another. In the end, the second taxi driver asked his friend to go ahead of him, for he wanted to learn how best to present his case. The first taxi driver happily agreed, and off he went before the court. The angels began to examine his deeds and way of life, granting him a reward for everything he did. He was granted a reward for arising in the morning, a reward for going to synagogue, and a reward for having bread and cheese for breakfast. The angels continued with their examination of the first taxi driver, giving him a reward for working eight hours a day. As for having attended a Torah lecture at night, well here the angels stopped and said, "For the sake of the holy Torah, you will be rewarded at the end, for there's simply not enough paper to record the reward granted for every word of Torah that you learned." Thus they continued, giving him a reward for walking to synagogue for Mincha, a reward for eating, a reward for sleeping eight hours, and so on it went. All the celestial beings then rejoiced and invited him to take his place with great honor in Gan Eden. When the second driver learned that his friend was rewarded for having eaten, he was delighted. He thought, "If we're rewarded for eating, then I'll have no problem!" Thus he came before the Celestial Court feeling sure of himself. However when he began to describe his daily activities, his standing in the eyes of the court was diminished, and it was getting worse with each passing word. When he was asked what he ate, he thought: "Good! Now I'll have a chance to be saved!" He said, "I had ten slices of bread, butter, eggs, vegetables, and...well, let's just say that I ate." He was therefore extremely surprised when, not only did this not shore up his standing before the court, it greatly diminished it! Now he was shocked, for he couldn't understand what was going on. He complained: "How can this be? My friend was given a reward for what he ate, yet not only was I not given a reward for eating, my standing diminished!"

The angels said to him, "Look, your friend came into the world and performed his task his life. In addition to that, he had to take care of his personal requirements, meaning that he had to eat, drink, sleep, and earn a living. Because these are things that people need to do in order to assume their task in life, he was given a reward for having done them. You, however, completely neglected the most important thing in life – your task – and all you cared about was your personal needs. Should you be rewarded for this? Was this why you were given life?"

The lesson here is that although Hashem commanded Abraham to leave his land, He said to him: "Abraham, understand that if you fulfill My word, not only will you not lose anything, I will also bless you and grant all your personal needs with blessing. You should also realize that you will receive a reward even for seeing to your personal needs." Thus when a person fulfills his task in life, he will even receive a reward for having eaten!

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, "Leave your land...and I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you...and in you all families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

In his book *Pahad David*, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita asks how we can possibly think that Abraham, who was thrown into a fiery furnace of the sake of Hashem, could have considered Hashem's command as a trial, to the point that Hashem had to ensure him of blessings. The answer is that Abraham invested so much spiritual energy into serving Hashem and purifying himself that the Torah emanated from his body. Thus every trial that affected his body (such as the trial of the fiery furnace) did not impair his service of Hashem, for his body was exceedingly holy.

On the contrary, each of those trials enabled Abraham to elevate himself further. However the trial of leaving his land (where he had brought so many people under the wings of the Shechinah), and wandering towards a place where he wasn't sure of having the same success, was considered a spiritual disaster for someone at his level. It was great trial for Abraham, and so Hashem came to his aid by saying: "Go for your own benefit and for your own good, and not only will you not be spiritually diminished, you will also learn what you still need in order to become perfect."

Choosing Between Two Ways

It is written, "There was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock, and the Canaanite and the Perizzite were then dwelling in the land" (Genesis 13:7).

This means that as long as there are differences among Jews on how to educate their children (feeding their livestock, to use the language of the verse) – whether to follow the way of Abraham (of whom it is written, "He will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the L-RD, doing charity and justice") or the way of Lot, who was drawn to and welcomed by the Sodomites (described as "very wicked and sinful") – and as long as people do not recognize that they must educate their children in the way of Abraham, the way of faith and Torah observance, then "the Canaanite and the Perizzite" will dwell in the land. That is, the land of Israel will be controlled by foreigners, control that Jews will not have merited for themselves.

Very Wicked

It is written, "The people of Sodom were very wicked and sinful before the L-RD" (Genesis 13:13).

What exactly does the word "very" mean?

The Mahari Assad Zatzal said, "It is written, 'Be very, very humble' [Perkei Avot 4:4]. Why 'very, very'?"

A person sometimes has two ways of becoming proud: Either he studied a great deal of Torah or gave a large amount of money to tzeddakah. This is "very, very" – the first meod ("very") represents the initials of mimino esh dat ("from His right a fiery law" [Deuteronomy 33:2]), while the second meod represents the initials of maskil el dal ("who contemplates the needy" [Psalms 41:2]). Thus "Be very, very humble" means that even if you possess both the first and second meod, do not become proud!

This also applies to the verse, "The people of Sodom were very wicked and sinful before the L-RD." Exactly how were they wicked and sinful before Hashem? By meod, money. They were meod (very) wicked before Hashem with regards to maskil el dal, for they gave nothing to tzeddakah. In fact the Sages tell us that they killed one of Lot's daughters because she provided a poor person with food and water.

Come and Reclaim Your Things

It is written, "The people of Sodom were very wicked and sinful before the L-RD" (Genesis 13:13).

Our Sages said that the people of Sodom wanted to enact a decree that prohibited the giving of tzeddakah, yet they were afraid of a public backlash. What did they do? They decreed that the poor could only be given objects, not food or money. Thus a needy person would knock at someone's door and be given a stove, at another home he would be given a cabinet, and so on. He would thus go from door to door carrying one heavy object on his back and another in his hands, all while suffering hunger and thirst. Once he died, an announcement was made in the city: "The burial of a poor man, the father of thirteen children, will take place in half an hour. Whoever wants to reclaim his things is asked to come to the cemetery to identify and retrieve them."

Long Term Education

It is written, "He armed chanichav [his trained ones]" (Genesis 14:14).

Rashi states, "This is Eliezer, whom he had trained for mitzvot, and it [chanich] is the beginning of the entrance of a person or a utensil to his designated purpose. Similarly, 'Chanoch [train] the youth' [Proverbs 22:6]."

Rabbi Meir Shapira Zatzal said, "From this Rashi we learn that educating a child is only called education when he continues in that education, 'his designated purpose.' If a man teaches the Torah to his son in his youth, yet does not ensure that he will remain a ben Torah as he grows older, this cannot be called chinuch."

Giving and Then Blessing

It is written, "Melchizedek the king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was the priest of the most high G-d, and he blessed him" (Genesis 14:18-19).

The tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev went to collect money for a Jew from a good family who had become poor. When he arrived at the home of Rabbi Baruch, the tzaddik of Berditchev saw a poor person standing before Rabbi Baruch with his head lowered. Rabbi Baruch gave him a blessing, and he left without receiving any money. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak tapped Rabbi Baruch on the shoulder and said with a smile, "Concerning Melchizedek the king of Salem, it is said that he first brought out bread and wine for Abraham as he returned from battle, and only then did he bless him."

Overview of the Parsha

Parsha Lech Lecha recounts the beginning of the era of Abraham, which is also the beginning of the era of Israel. Abraham himself was separated from earlier generations of mankind, and although they forgot Hashem, Abraham began to invoke His Name.

In this parsha Abram becomes Abraham, from whom would emerge a people destined to become a light for the nations. Following Hashem's orders, Abram leaves his land and journeys with Lot towards the land of Canaan. After they arrive, they travel to Egypt because of a famine, and upon returning they part ways because the land cannot support them both. In the war against the kings, Abram returns the spoils he had captured, and in a vision he is promised that he has nothing to fear, for Hashem will protect him and increase his numbers. In the Covenant Between the Parts, Abram receives the promise that he will inherit "this land." Hashem also tells him that his descendants will be strangers in a land not their own, and that they will be oppressed until the fourth generation returns to Canaan. After living in the land for ten years, Sarai (who was childless) gives Abram her maidservant so that she might obtain children through her. When this maidservant conceives, she begins to despise Sarai and runs away. An angel tells her to return to Abram, and she bears him a son. These are Hagar and Ishmael. At the age of 99, Abram is given his new name, Abraham, and likewise Sarai is named Sarah. Hashem gives Abraham and his descendants the covenant of circumcision, promising to give them the land of Canaan.

EISHET CHAYIL

Help in the Home

Mrs. Aliza Greenblatt had just finished a long day of work, a day of punishing household chores that included washing loads of laundry until sunset. Now she was going to hang these clothes out to dry. Her husband, Rabbi Avraham Baruch, offered to help with this task, but in her tactfulness she refused his offer. Because she wanted her husband to return to his Torah learning, she told him that she would hang all these clothes herself. Yet Rabbi Avraham Baruch realized just how much work she had, and just how difficult it was going to be, so he insisted on hanging them all himself. Vehemently refusing, she put the laundry basket down and pretended not to listen. When her husband saw this, he returned to his studies. At that point she took the laundry basket and walked around the house and through the yard so her husband wouldn't see her working and therefore stop studying. She forsook his help and used every ounce of her strength to ensure that he would study Torah, which for her was the reward of all her work.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

For Your Sake

It is written, "That it may go well with me for your sake" (Genesis 12:13).

Rashi states, "They will give me gifts."

We need to understand Rashi's remark, for Abraham hated gifts. This is clear from what he said to the king of Sodom: "[I will not take] so much as a thread to a shoe strap...so you cannot say: 'It is I who made Abram rich' " (Genesis 14:23). Although it was only fair for Abraham to receive something, he did not want to benefit from anything. Therefore how can Rashi say that he wanted to receive gifts?

This can be understood by something that occurred to Rabbi Yosef Hochgelernter Zatzal, the author of Mishnat Chachamim on the Rambam. When Rabbi Yosef was appointed as the Rav of Zamosc, he refused to accept a salary from the Jewish community, for his father-in-law (a very wealthy man) generously provided for him. In Zamosc, however, there was a takanah stipulating that every butcher in town had to provide the Rav with a certain quantity of meat every week. The fact that Rabbi Yosef Hochgelernter did not refuse this meat greatly surprised his wife. She said to him, "You're right not to take a monthly salary, since we don't need it. So why did you agree to accept meat every week?"

The Rav replied, "I'm not accepting it for my sake. Thank G-d, we have enough meat to eat. However I'm concerned that the Rav who succeeds me will be a Torah scholar without financial means. If I refuse to accept this meat, the takanah might be forgotten and that poor Rav will be deprived of food!"

In reality, Abraham did not need the gifts that Rashi mentions. In fact he abhorred them. However by Ruach Hakodesh, Abraham saw that "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children," meaning that whatever happened to him would also happen to his descendants. His descent into Egypt because of a famine was a sign that his descendants would also venture into Egypt because of a famine, and Sarah's imprisonment in Egypt signaled that his descendants would be enslaved there. Abraham's departure from Egypt was a sign that his children would be rescued from Egypt, and any gifts he received meant that his descendants would leave Egypt with wealth. Because Abraham did not want them to leave Egypt in abject poverty, he went against his nature and agreed to accept these gifts, given to him on account of Sarah.

This is why Abraham said to her: They will give me gifts "for your sake." Here he stressed "for your sake," which alludes to a teaching of the Sages: "Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation" (Shemot Rabba 1:12). Similarly, Abraham wanted to stress that following the path laid out by our Sages does not result in loss. The Sages also said, "A man must always observe the honor due to his wife, because blessings rest on a man's home only on account of his wife" (Bava Metzia 59a). This is why Abraham stressed "for your sake." In other words, every blessing he received was, as the Sages have said, "for your sake." Thus it follows that a woman herself, not only her husband, must recognize her greatness as a daughter of Sarah, following her ways and learning from her modesty.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Haim Pinto “Hakatan”

The holy kabbalist Rabbi Haim Pinto of Casablanca, also known as Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan (to distinguish him from his grandfather, Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol), was born in Essaouira in the year 5625 (1865).

Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan was the son of Rabbi Yehuda Pinto and the grandson of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol, who is buried in Essaouira. The home of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan, located at 36 Commandant Provost Street in Casablanca, has become a place of pilgrimage for Jews who go there and light candles in his memory.

Rabbi Haim Pinto was known for his modesty and gift of prophesy, as evidenced by the following story, one of many: One day two people were involved in a serious car accident. They promised Hashem that if they ever recovered, they would give money to tzeddakah. However after they recovered, they promptly forgot their promise. Rabbi Haim Pinto had them summoned, told them everything that had happened to them, and asked them to fulfill their promise by giving money to tzeddakah. This made them realize the tremendous holiness of Rabbi Haim, to whom they gave their money in order to distribute to the poor.

Many of Rabbi Haim Pinto’s other great deeds are described in a book that will soon be published, one written by Rabbi Haim’s grandson, our teacher Rabbi David Pinto Shlita. Rabbi Haim Pinto left this world on Cheshvan 15, 5698 (10/20/1937), and his body was laid to rest in Casablanca. May his merit protect us all.

A TRUE STORY

Making Souls

It is written, “The souls they made in Haran” (Genesis 12:5).

Simply by his actions, every Jew has the ability to “make souls” if his heart is filled with Torah and the fear of Heaven. We have an example of this in Rabbi Shimon Gueli Shlita. A police car once struck Rabbi Shimon as he was crossing the street, severely injuring his leg. Although the Rav was lying in the street and covered with blood, he did not forget G-d despite his great pain. When the police officer whose car struck him asked how he could make amends, the Rav said: “If you want to help me, take it upon yourself to keep Shabbat!”

At the time of this accident, a non-observant Jewish couple happened to be passing by. They approached the Rav and heard what the police office asked him, as well as the Rav’s astonishing response. This had a profound impact on them, and they even decided to visit him in the hospital.

When they arrived at the Rav’s bedside, they were again surprised to notice that the Rav was not inclined to speak about himself. Rather, everything he said revolved around the merit of observing Shabbat. In fact the couple was so surprised by what they heard that they remained silent. The man then kissed the Rav and said, “Only now do I understand the greatness of Torah study. If someone in the Beit Midrash can transform himself from an animal into a man, with his main focus being on Hashem, he must be completely different from those who haven’t found their place in the Beit Midrash, those who only think of themselves.” This is how we “make souls.” This is how we sanctify Hashem’s Name.

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Only One Thing

It is written, “And it happened in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar” (Genesis 14:1).

A man went on a distant journey, leaving behind a son who studied Torah in Eretz Israel. As his final day approached, the man composed a will in which he bequeathed to his slave everything he owned, except for one thing, which his son would choose for himself. When the man died, the slave took the man’s will along with all of his possessions and traveled to Eretz Israel. He met the man’s son and said to him, “Your father has died. In his will he stipulated that I will acquire everything he owns except one thing, which is yours for the choosing.”

What did the son do? He went to his Rav and explained the situation to him. The Rav said, “Your father was very intelligent and fully understood the Halachah. He thought: ‘If I leave all my possessions to my slave, he’ll run off and squander them. I will give them to him as a gift so he protects them, and my son will choose for himself one thing from among them all.’ When you go with the slave to the Beit Din and he shows them your father’s will, you should declare: ‘My father stipulated that I should choose for myself one thing from among all of my father’s possessions. I therefore choose his slave.’ ”

This is precisely what the son did. He therefore acquired his father’s slave and everything he owned, for one who acquires a slave also acquires his possessions. In regards to this, King Solomon said: “To the man who pleases Him, He has given wisdom, knowledge, and joy” – this is the father, “but to the sinner He has given the urge to gather and amass” – this is the slave, “that he may give it over to one who is pleasing to G-d” – this is the son (Ecclesiastes 2:26). Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “I am establishing strife among the kings, that Abraham may come and take their wealth.”

– Tanhuma, Lech Lecha 8

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

The Tears of the Gaon

It is written, “There is no calculating His understanding” (Isaiah 40:28).

It is said that Rabbi Saadia Gaon, among the Babylonian Geonim who lived more than a thousand years ago, once found himself in a city where people did not know who he was. He was suitably welcomed at an inn, though the innkeeper (who was unaware of the Gaon’s identity) did not honor him in any special way. A few days later, when the townspeople learned of Rabbi Saadia Gaon’s identity, the innkeeper came to him in tears and begged him for forgiveness, since he had not properly honored the Gaon.

The Gaon asked him, “Why are you afraid that you haven’t shown me enough honor? You gave me food and drink, as well as a place to sleep.” The innkeeper said, “If I knew that the Gaon of the generation was my guest, I would have honored him in a completely different way!”

Upon hearing this response, Rabbi Saadia Gaon broke into tears. He said to the innkeeper, “You have just taught me a lesson, which is how much more we should honor the Holy One, blessed be He! Everyone clearly realizes that we know but an infinitesimal part of the Creator, Whose glory fills the entire universe. Since each day we know Him a little better through the study of Torah and Mussar, we should bitterly regret not having properly honored Him in previous days.”