

Lech Lecha 5784
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Standing Up for Israel

Sometimes a Biblical narrative which is familiar to us can take on new meaning given the lens through which we are viewing it at any given moment. That happened to me while looking at the story of Abram and his nephew Lot, most of which appears in our parasha of Lech Lecha. Both bookends of this story have what to teach us and are cause for reflection as we experience most everything in these unexpectedly unstable days for Israel, by which we have all been deeply affected.

It's a story with only two chapters, the first one and the last one. In the first the Torah tells us that Abram and Lot's herdsmen were quarreling. They each had amassed too much wealth - soon by you, by the way - including cattle, to inhabit the same part of the land that would become known as Israel. To you and me, this sounds strange. Israel is a small country but it isn't that small. They could have moved another block over, maybe a town, a few kilometers. How much land did each really need? Makes you think there was more going on here in connection to the quarreling that the Torah reports. Whatever its origin it was so intense that Abram suggests they separate, offering Lot whatever part of the land he wished. Lot chose the fertile kikar hayarden, the well altered plain of Jordan, and moved his family and his stuff and his cattle there, an area that included his new neighbors in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abram is elsewhere described as hospitable, and diplomatic, and the paragon of certain virtues that we are still meant to seek to emulate. But with Lot, his own nephew, he could see no pathway forward other than separation. We get no behind the scenes look at Abram's thought process here, and it seems to be his idea - God is not mentioned as the source of the separation. If it bothered Abram, if he thought about it for a long time, if he would have preferred a different outcome - we simply do not know.

But we can reflect on it given its rather close thematic connection to one of Israel's real-world struggles and multiple attempts to meet them. How much of Israel's intention is to be a country for all of its citizens, something that has been exemplified in so many ways including that rather rare feat of protecting holy sites of all religions? And how much of Israel's purpose is to be a Jewish state which, without apology, is going to hold a special but not necessarily privileged place for the Jewish people who live there? Israel has balanced these sometimes competing aspects of its identity, with some success, and some not as great success, but has since the moment of its modern inception done what many others in its neighborhood which is to state and strive unequivocally to equally protect all of its citizens, Jew and non-Jew alike.

And it has dealt with the concept of separation as well. As much as it has been tried there are very few cities in Israel where Jews and Arabs live side by side, or even block by block. Haifa is talked about as an exception, though only 11 percent of its population is Arab. Yafo, Acre, Ramle and Lod also have somewhat mixed populations. Mostly, though, it is more of an Abram and Lot situation - and with most Arabs exempt from army service, which is often the gateway to connections that will be utilized later in life for business or career advancement, some of that separation has become rather deeply ingrained. Something like 98 percent of Israelis say that all of their closest friends are Jewish. It is not bad, or good, it just is and it is a part of Israel's reality.

Separation has also been considered in numerous peace plans, starting, we and the world should not forget, when the United Nations first offered the partition plan in 1947. Israel - after massive internal debate - accepted and the Arab armies attacked. It hasn't gotten much better as numerous other peace deals have been offered and rejected by Palestinian leadership which famously never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. On the deal brokered by President Clinton that the former and now deceased head of the PLO declined, one of his last calls in office was with the checkered-kafiyeh wearing gun toting coward whose name will not be mentioned here. He congratulated the president on his successful

presidency to which Clinton responded Mr. Chairman, I'm a failure and you made me one. It's in his book, you can look it up.

The Abram-Lot separation ends in a way that is also highly instructive and which resonates today. Lot chooses to go toward unstable S'dom, and suffers for it. He gets caught up in a regional conflict and gets taken captive. While we don't know how long Abram thought about his separation plan from Lot, here the Torah is much more clear. Abram hears the news that his nephew is in trouble. In the very same verse that he hears the news, he gathers a platoon of exactly 318 men, and that night they deployed, defeated the enemy holding Lot, and rescued him and his family. The alacrity and efficiency is striking. No ruminating, no hesitation - Abram organizes, goes, fights, and secures Lot's freedom.

Remind you of anything? Friends, over the past ten to fifteen years many concerns have been expressed over the increasing distance between Israel and North American Jewry, with the talking past each other or down to each other or in ways that have made us feel like less than full partners in this relationship. You know the expression "when the chips are down". Well when the chips went down just three weeks ago today, who showed up for Israel? Who gathered and rallied, who cried and lost sleep with worry, who gave and gave and gave some more whenever that need was communicated, who prayed with intensity matching any other trying circumstance that any of us can think of? Not Russia, not China, not India - all of whom Israel has reached out to because of what was perceived to be a fading connection to the North American Diaspora. We did. You did. Without a second thought or hesitation we stood up and we will stand up for Israel in whatever way we are needed, in whatever way we can help.

It is a moment of crisis but it is also a moment of unity. May we remember and act in that spirit now when Israel needs us, and may we remember it in the future when Israel is at peace. Amen and Am Yisrael Chai.