

Lech Lecha: Avraham's Three Great Disappointments by The Rav

- Outline of shiur by Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, zt"l, given app. 1952.

Avraham's three great disappointments as manifest in Parshat Lech Lecha. Followed by a sermon based on the last of the episodes in the shiur.

LECH LECHA: AVRAHAM'S THREE GREAT DISAPPOINTMENTS

(Outline of thoughts By Harav Yoseph Dov Soloveitchik as I remember them from 1952 or 1953 followed by a sermon based on these thoughts.)

The sermon is based on a shiur which Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l delivered sometime between 1952 and 1953. Since I remember the outline of the shiur, I will offer it first. There were three major points, which the Rav, zt"l, called Avram's three major disappointments. This sermon is based on the third, climactic section of the Rav's shiur. Obviously, a shiur which I remember orally from 1952 or 1953 cannot be given in the exact format. It is merely an outline of the thoughts he expressed as I remember them.

Avram's three great disappointments

When Avram received God's message to go to the land he would be shown, he also received a promise that the Almighty would make him a great nation and he would be a blessing to all people on earth.

Avram thought God meant that his mission was to convert the nations of the world to monotheism, starting with the land he would be shown. So he set out on the journey kaasher diber elav Hashem, "As God's message appeared to him".

Since Avram was concerned with converting all the people he would meet to Hashem, he took with him, not only Sarai, his wife, but also Lot and hanefesh asher aso beHaran, as our sages understand it (Rashi and others), "The converts Sarai and Avram had already made in Haran". You don't hear another word about these converts. They must have left him one by one as he and his family drew further and further away from "home".

Vayetzu lalechet artza Canaan, vayavou artza Canaan clearly indicates that to Avram the journey itself was his major purpose. All along the way he was calling out in God's name to everyone he met. Till finally he came to Canaan.

Even there, he could not rest, for he had not fulfilled his mission of converting the inhabitants. So Vayaavor Avram baaretz, "He passed through the land", speaking to all its inhabitants, and he directed his message to the Canaanites, vahaCanaani az baaretz.

The Almighty sought to teach Avram that his real purpose was to have physical children and bring them up to inherit the land, and through them to be a blessing to all. So God appeared to

Avram and said, Lezaracha eten et haaretz hazot, "to your own children will I give this land".

But Avram thought the message referred to spiritual children, so Vayiven sham mizbeach laHashem hanireh eylav, "He built an altar on the spot to Hashem, as he understood Hashem's message". Thus, with energy renewed, he moved from there to the mountain east of Beth-El, built an altar (never does it say he sacrificed upon the altars he built, for apparently he built them to attract a crowd so that he could address the people, calling to them in Hashem's name) Vayikra beshem Hashem.

And he kept traveling further and further southwards.. Why southwards? Because that was closer to Egypt, and Egypt was the most civilized country at that time, the cradle of civilization, as it is often called. Who better to heed his message?

And so the Lord helped him. "You seek to go towards the land where Egypt had sway? I will help you, sending famine into the land, and you will be forced to go to Egypt itself, and then let us see if they are really civilized enough to listen to you."

Only when Avram saw the lascivious, immoral Egyptians, and realized that his wife was in grave danger, did he require her to assume the guise of his sister. In that way he could play off one suitor against another, and thus in a short time escape from that land. Of course, he could not know that the one suitor who could have no rival, the King himself, would take Sarai to his palace.

So in Chapter 13 we see Avram escaping Egypt after the great disappointment of his encounter with the highly civilized and grossly immoral Egyptians, and he is no more successful in his mission than before. Yet he continues his journey, Vayelech lemasaav, to the very places he came to before, and finally to the very place he had earlier pitched his tent, east of Beth-El. He returned, indeed, to the very altar he built from which he preached to all. And again he called out in Hashem's Name.

And so begins his second great disappointment. Who should have heeded Avram's word most? Who should be most influenced by him? Is it not his nephew Lot and all that is his? And yet Lot and his shepherds are quite content to forsake Avram and his mission, and choose particularly the rich pasture land of the most wicked people of that time, Sodom and its neighbors. Veanshei Sedom raim vahataim laHashem meod....

After this second disappointment, Avram is not sure where he can next teach his message. If Lot would not listen, then who else would?

So Hashem appears to him and stresses that the land would be given to his own biological children. "And the Lord said unto Abram after Lot had departed from him; 'Lift up, now, your eyes, and look from the place where you are, North South, East and West; For all the land you see will I give to you and to your children forever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth; so that if a man can count the dust of the earth, then shall your seed also be counted.'" Nothing could be clearer. Abram will have biological children to carry on his message. Furthermore, Avram is asked to make a physical kinyan in the land, walking its length and

breadth, an indication that the children God promises are going to be actual, physical children.

Yet Avram is so imbued with belief in his message and that the people of the land, even of Sodom, would ultimately heed it, that he moves his tent to another location, Eilonei Mamre, and again he builds an altar to Hashem.

And so begins the story of the third disappointment. For his last hope is that the power is yet within him to convince the inhabitants of the land of Canaan including Sodom and his wicked neighbors of the error of their ways. There is a war of four kings against five, Lot and his family are taken prisoner together with the King of Sodom and his followers. Avram is forced to arm his household and to rescue them.

Avram triumphs, saves Sodom's King and his followers as well as his nephew Lot and his family. Does the King of Sodom mend his ways, or even show gratitude? On the contrary. He says clearly, Ten li hamefesh. Harechush kach lach. "Avram, we now know who you really are. You have been preaching goodness and brotherhood and peace all this time. Now we know you. Your spiritual message is nothing. All you want is booty. In the future, leave spiritual things to me. Ten li hanefesh. We know what you really want. Harechush kach lach. You take the booty." And with these words Avram sees his last hope crumbling before him. For the first and only time in the Torah he is furious, and declares, Harimoti yadi el Adoshem Kel Elyon, Kone Shamayim Vaaretz, im mihut vead seroch naal ekach, velo tomar anin heesharti et Avraham....

So now Hashem appears and doesn't have to promise Avram anything, doesn't have to mention children. Avram understands the situation altogether too well. And when the pasuk says, Achar hadevarim haeleh, haya devar Hashem el Avram bamachaze lemor, al tirah Avram, anochi magen lecha, secharcha harbe meod. Avram answers with a desperate response, a heartbreaking cry, Hashem Elokim, ma titen li veanochi holech ariri, uben meshek beti hu Damesek Eliezer?

And then it is that the Almighty assures him that Eliezer will not be his heir, but Ki im asher yetze mimeecha hu yirashcha.

And so begins the new life and mission of Avram with the Brit ben Habesarim, with the prophecy for the future of our people, and with his awareness that his mission is bound up with his children.

(So ends the shiur of the Rav, zt"l as I remember it. On its basis I wrote the following sermon which can be adapted as you see fit to the conditions of modern times.)

LECH LECHA

Who was the first recorded anti-Semite? Haman with his plot? But Pharaoh with his oppression was earlier. Pharaoh then? No, there was a still earlier anti-Semite; the King of Sodom, in our Torah portion. Anti-Semitism was born with Abram our first Hebrew. It is coexistent with our people.

Consider the first confrontation between Avram and the King of Sodom: Abram, the mildest,

most generous, kindly man of God, is pictured full of rage and fury for the only time in the Torah, declaring with righteous indignation, Harimoti yadi el Adoshem Kel Elyon, Kone Shamayim Vaaretz, im mihut vead seroch naal ekach, velo tomar anin heesharti et Avraham....

Surely something must have happened to cause this; something serious enough to warrant such an outburst from Avram! Something so serious that it shook him to the deepest part of his soul....

He was not so moved when he had to leave his native land at God's command to seek a new and unknown land. He was not so shaken at the narrow escape of his beloved Sarai and he himself from Egypt's lecherous and murderous king. Nor was he so stirred, even when Lot his nephew left him. After each of these traumatic events, when God came to him and said, "Your children shall inherit the land, be not afraid," Avram accepted the promise, the challenge and the danger without a word of protest.

But when, after the confrontation with Sodom, God came to him and said "Be not afraid, your reward will still be great", Avram remained so shattered that he cried out in protest - "O Lord God, what can you give me if I am childless?"

Apparently Avram didn't worry that he was childless before. After all, he had all the spiritual children he could want in the whole inhabited world - every one a child of God who could be taught about His Father in Heaven. It was only after the meeting and argument with Sodom's king that Avram became disillusioned with his entire society and declared, "O God, unless you give me just one son to carry on the message, nothing will come of all my teaching; it will all die with me. Do you expect my message and lessons to be carried on by such as Eliezer my Gentile Steward from Damascus?"

What happened at that confrontation with Sodom's king to anger Avram so, and to cause such disillusion?

Avram was already considered a great man in his day. His wealth and power alone would have made it impossible to ignore him. But he was also the great religious personality who had brought the idea of One God to the world, and he was recognized in his time as such. He was a man of peace, because peace as well as truth is the sign and seal of Almighty God. But even peace must sometimes be shattered to save lives, and Avram was forced to go to war in that miniature world war of long ago, the four kings against the five, in order to save Lot his nephew. In the battle he also saved the King of Sodom.

Now, after the war; when Avram the general is ready to disarm his own household soldiers, Sodom goes out to meet his rescuer at the Emek Hashave, which literally means the "level valley" or valley of equality.

And Sodom speaks words to Abraham, not of thanks, but of derision;

"You Avram, you who preach peace and God and heaven and the spirit and soul, you who used to be thought so much better than we in spirit, so much above other people; Never mind, we are

on Emek Hashave, you are absolutely no different from us, no better and in fact a hypocrite. Because we know what you really want, and why you really went to war. For idealism? Nonsense! To save your nephew? Nonsense. Ten li hanefesh! Leave idealism to me! Leave spiritual things to me! Harechush kach lach! You take the booty, for that's what you really want! You, Jew, whose wealth buys people, whose power runs my foreign policy, we know what you really want. Leave me the people. Stay out of my politics. Stick to your own moneybags Jew. It is our money in the first place! Harechush kach lach!" You talk of peace and security and good will and good neighborliness, it's all a lie. There is just one thing you want, dollars and cents! Give me the souls, leave spiritual things to me, and stop preaching to me.

That is why Avram became livid with rage. And he lifted up his hand in oath, swearing to God above, I lift my hand to God above and swear that i will not take a thread or shoelace from Sodom, and you shall not say you made Abraham rich....

So, then, when Avram turned away from Sodom, now his spiritual foe, and returned to Jerusalem where he was greeted by his remaining friend, Malkitzedek, who some say was Abraham's teacher Shem, the one among perhaps a few friends who did not desert Avram, he was a disillusioned man.

Maase avot siman lebanim. Avram's experience recurred countless times in our history, and in countless ways. And our generation is not immune.

And what was Abraham's response? If Abraham was the first to face such a situation, and now so do we, we ought to know what he answered to God! He answered, Hashem Elokim, ma titen li veanochi holech ariri. "Lord God, my only hope is my children!"

We say the same. My children. Our Jewish people, Abraham's children must be stronger and more courageous, more steadfast and more determined than ever before. Our people, our spokesmen, our workers, our warriors, must be stronger than ever, and more alert. Like watchmen on the ramparts, in the Biblical metaphor, we must be watchmen on the ramparts! For this is a critical time, no less than during any of the wars Israel had previously been forced to fight.

And finally, Adoshem Elokim, ma titen li veanochi holech ariri. We are put on the alert, by no less a historical personage than the King of Sodom himself! And we can swear with Abraham, that the real answer is "Look to our children and community", that they grow up strong enough in their Judaism, and loyal enough, to withstand any tests and frustrations that face them; that like we ourselves, they learn Avram's lesson well. For if we cannot make them strong in the face of any adversity, then, Adoshem Elokim, ma titen li veanochi holech ariri, then the hope of our future is lost. But if we do, then Sodom and all he represents cannot touch us.

And one day the world will acknowledge, with Malki Tzedek King of ancient Jerusalem and Abraham's ally, that Abraham and his descendants are the only reliable men of peace in that part of the world, the only ones to be relied upon in an alliance for the sake of heaven, and for the sake of the true brotherhood of man. So let it be, uba leTziyon Goel, venomar amen.

Submitted by Nisson E. Shulman