

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



AVRAHAM, LOT, AND THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

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Orthodox Judaism relates to the Torah as a source of authority with no actual power.

Human beings today can acquire meaning from the Torah only through the process of interpretation. Our minds and souls have no direct access to the Author's intent; we can access it only through the medium of language.

Human interpreters seek to claim the authority of Torah for their interpretations. A successful claim of authority may give the interpretations power. But that power belongs to the interpreter, not to the interpreted text.

I wrote "**may**" give the interpretations power because one more step is needed. An interpretation has power in a given circumstance only once it has been applied to that circumstance. So it's really more correct to say that power belongs exclusively to appliers but derives from authority which inheres primarily in the Torah and secondarily in interpreters.

For example: Reuven tells Shimon that he must have a string dyed blue from a murex trunculus as part of his tzitzit because the Torah says "*petil tchelet*". Shimon acknowledges the authority of the verse, but denies that the murex trunculus is a source of genuine tchelet. Shimon has no reason to obey Reuven unless he is convinced by Reuven's application of the verse to murex trunculus dye, or unless he believes that the proper interpretation of a different verse in the Torah requires him to defer to Reuven's application of this verse.

So it is always either a mistake or a more-or-less misleading shorthand when someone claims that we must do something because of a prophecy in the Torah, or to match a model in the Torah. They can mean only that they believe the correct interpretation and application of the prophecy or model is X. We must act as they suggest only if we are convinced of the truth of their interpretation and application.

With that introduction, I want to briefly sketch and consider several models-for-behavior that might be derived from Avraham's relationship with Lot. Specifically, I want to examine one model that criticizes Avraham for giving Lot a share in the Land, when the Land as a whole was (at that point) more than large enough to contain the both of them. The catalyzing question is: Was Lot supposed to come with

Avram the first time he goes to Canaan? What about on the return to Egypt?

Paaneiach Raza argues that G-d's initial command "*go forth from your land, your homeland, and your father's house*" specifically excluded bringing along any member of Avram's biological family, including his nephew Lot. However, once Lot chose to come along out of genuine admiration for and identification with Avraham's values, Avraham could not send him away from under the sheltering wings of the Divine Presence, even at the cost of diminishing his own religious experience. (Deborah Klapper always notes that Sarai is also a blood-relative, and that the first land Avraham acquires in Canaan is her grave.)

That is how many commentaries explain Lot's presence. I suggest as an alternative that according to the midrash, Lot's father died as a result of Avraham choosing to confront Nimrod's intolerance of monotheism, and that Avraham as a result felt responsible for the orphan and unable to turn him away.

We've thus seen two ways in which Avraham might have allowed the reality of human experience to block the application of even a clear Divine decree. He might have allowed another person's religious growth to inhibit his own obedience; or he might have allowed his interpersonal responsibilities to take precedence over his obligations *bein adam laMakom*.

How does G-d react to the presence of Lot? Bereishit Rabbah 41:8 records a dispute. Rabbi Yudah held that G-d was *k'b'yakhol* angry when Lot separated from Avraham: "He cleaves to everyone, but he can't cleave to his brother's son?" But Rabbi Nechemyah held that G-d was *k'b'yakhol* angry when Lot went with Avraham: "I have said to him 'I have given this land to your descendants', yet he brings Lot his brother's son with him as his heir?! Let him take two random foundlings from the marketplace and make them his heirs!"

It seems clear that Rabbi Yudah would have objected to separating from Lot at any earlier point as well. Rabbi Nechemyah may object only to Avraham bringing Lot along as a presumptive heir. However, so long as Avraham had no children, how could Lot not be the presumptive heir? Perhaps

Rabbi Yudah holds that Lot being the presumptive heir is trivial so long as he would reliably accept a biological child replacing him.

Meshekh Chokhmah brilliantly grounds the dispute between Rabbis Yudah and Nechemyah in a broader exegetical dispute found in Bereishit Rabbah 44:5.

Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Huna, each in the name of Rabbi Yosay ben Zimra:

Rabbi Yudan said:

Everywhere that the Torah says

achar means 'soon after';

acharay means 'long after';

but R. Huna said:

Everywhere that the Torah says

acharay means 'soon after';

achar means 'long after'.

Meshekh Chokhmah applies these positions to Bereishit 13:14, in which G-d appears to Avraham "*acharay*" Lot separates from him, and gives more specific dimensions and contours to the land that Avraham's descendants will inherit. If G-d appears soon after Lot's separation, that suggests that Lot's presence was inhibiting G-d's relationship with Avraham. But if G-d appears only long after, perhaps He was conveying His displeasure at the separation via His absence.

Netziv, however, suggests that Lot was deteriorating spiritually (as evidenced by allowing his shepherds to fight with Avram's) and growing excessively familiar with Avraham (he is described as *vayelekh ito* on the initial journey, but as *vaya'al imo* on the return from Egypt; Netziv contends that "*imo*" is more familiar). One line of commentary suggests that Avraham nevertheless was compelled to take Lot with him after Egypt in gratitude for not exposing the sister-wife ruse; I wonder whether covering for Avraham may have diminished Lot's awe of Avraham and contributed to his spiritual decline. The bottom line according to Netziv is that everyone agrees that Avraham had to separate from Lot when he did; they disagree only about whether he should have done so earlier.

However, even if Netziv is correct, we can still criticize the manner of separation. Thus *Paaneiach Raza* contends that Avraham should not have given Lot the Land around Sodom and Gomorrah, because eventually his biological descendants would need it all. G-d's promise to Avraham that "Your seed will be as the dust of the land" thus contains an implicit criticism.

But one might respond as follows: G-d's initial revelation to Avram was also intended to exclude Lot, and yet Lot came along, and perhaps Avram was right to take him along. We do not live in a world that reconciles all *lekhatchilah* choices. If Avram was justified in taking Lot along, even though it meant postponing or even undermining his fulfillment of *lekh lekha*, perhaps he would also be justified in giving Lot a share of the Land, at least until G-d redistributed it directly.

We can reasonably interpret *acharay*, *lekh lekha*, *imo/itto* and other words and phrases in multiple ways. We can be comfortable or uncomfortable with the idea of Avraham postponing fulfillment of a direct command because of concern for another's spiritual wellbeing, or his own need to take responsibility for a tragic miscalculation, or express gratitude, and so forth. We can argue that Lot was an incomparably better influence, or worse influence, than any current inhabitants of the Land Formerly Known As Canaan, and in that and many other ways reject the application of his story to our situation.

What we mustn't do, I humbly submit, is allow the conflation of text, interpretation and application. So long as we understand that we are wrestling for the authority of Torah, and therefore for our own power, the possibility of genuine conversation among truth seekers remains possible.

Shabbat shalom!

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