

# The Finances of the Forefathers - Part 1

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Introduction to Parashat Hashavua

Yeshivat Har Etzion

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## PARASHAT LEKH LEKHA

### The Finances of the Forefathers – Part 1

By Rav Yaakov Beasley

#### Part 1 – A Blessing or a Curse

With little introduction, the Torah catapults Avraham to *Bereishi's* center stage. In three staccato verses, God challenges Avram to leave everything behind and blaze a new path together with Him:

Now the LORD said unto Avram: Get you out of your country, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you will be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless you and those that curse you I will curse; and through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (12:1-3)

Benno Jacob remarks that the fivefold repetition of the root "bless" (*b.r.kh.*) corresponds to the fivefold repetition of the word light on Creation's first day. From the downfall of the first man until Avraham's advent, God's utterances have been limited to curses, responding to humanity's failures. Now, a new world is being created, a world that is abundant in blessing. The Rabbis make many attempts to identify the various blessings proffered, from abundant children, fame, success and good fortune for Avraham and for all those that ally themselves with him. Radak and Ramban suggest that Avraham will become the new standard by which all success is measured.

Prominent among the commentators' suggestions is the theme of tremendous riches (see Rashi, 12:2, *s.v. va-avarekheka*, Seforno, Radak). The Hebrew word for possessions, "*rekhush*," is a key word<sup>[1]</sup> that appears eight times in the Avraham narratives, not including several detailed listings of cattle, livestock, maids and servants. How Avraham acquires his wealth, and how he disposes of it,

provides us with an object lesson how the blessing of financial success can become a test simultaneously.

Almost immediately upon entering the land of Canaan, Avraham confronts his first challenge: "a grave famine has befallen the land," and he must leave for greener pastures. They go down to Egypt, and immediately before entering, Avraham tells Sara:

"See, I know that you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say, 'She's his wife,' they will kill me, while you they will let live. Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your account, and I shall stay alive because of you." (12:11-13)

That Avraham intended to resort to deception in an attempt to protect Sara did not trouble most commentators<sup>[2]</sup>; for had Avraham been straightforward instead, he probably would have been killed immediately, leaving Sara entirely at the mercy of the depraved Egyptians.<sup>[3]</sup> However, Avraham's implied suggestion that he would profit from Sarah's beauty disturbs our sensitivity; it is hard to reconcile our understanding of the righteous patriarch with the text's apparent portrayal of Avraham as a callous, profiteering individual, who treats his wife as property to barter. Textually, we can approach Avraham's request in two ways: to read them as two separate requests, or to view the second as an explanation of the first. The Radak immediately jumps to defend Avraham's behavior, taking the second approach. He suggests that the parallelism of Avraham's speech indicates that the second segment explains the first:

[What is the meaning of] "It will go well with me on your account"? [That] "I shall stay alive because of you" – that you said that you are my sister. For the goodness is that I am alive, for Avraham never intended that they should provide him with anything beyond that, despite the fact that it states, "And they did well with him [Avraham] for her sake" (v. 16), this wasn't, God forbid, Avraham's intention that he profit from her disgrace, for her disgrace was his disgrace.

However, most commentators read Avraham's statement as consisting of two separate requests, and Rashi's interpretation (v. 13, *s.v. le-ma'an yitav li ba'avurekh*), that they [the Egyptians] would give Avraham gifts, seems closer to the simple meaning of the words. The Seforno, Gur Aryeh, and Malbim all suggest that Avraham intended to entertain marriage offers from various Egyptian functionaries and noblemen. In olden times, it was customary to shower the prospective bride with presents and inducements. When the people saw how their nobility honored Sara, they would be afraid to lay a finger upon Avraham, thus assuring Sara's safety.

Whatever Avraham's objective, the outcome could not have been worse. Sara's beauty catches the eyes of the Egyptian courtiers, who praise her to the palace, and she is taken; while Avraham, if not a willing accomplice, is handsomely rewarded. Only God's immediate intervention

prevents Sara's dishonor. After scolding Avraham, Pharaoh orders his expulsion from the country, and Avraham returns to Canaan, but this time "heavily laden with cattle, silver, and gold" (13:2). More significantly, Avraham's newfound wealth is about to have a decidedly negative effect within his family. The Torah describes Avraham's return from Egypt as follows:

And Avram came up from Egypt – he, his wife, and all that he had, and Lot (came) with him to the south. (13:1).

This verse, by itself, appears innocuous, until we compare it to the opening description of Avraham's first voyage to Canaan.

And Avram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions.

Quite cleverly, the Torah's literal representation of their return reflects the new reality facing Avraham – materials goods have become between him and Lot.<sup>[4]</sup> This allusion is explicitly stated in verse 5, after two competing descriptions of Avraham's wealth and Lot's.

A - And the land was not able to support their dwelling together

B - For their possessions were many

A' - And they were unable to dwel together.

The simple chiasm (ABA') of the verse places the cause of their breakup in the middle – the wealth that they enjoyed. However, the Torah's repetition of their inability to dwell together appears superfluous. Upon a closer reading, we note a subtle difference between the two halves of the verse. The first statement describes an objective reality – the inability of the land to support them. The second half describes a different reality – it is Avraham's and Lot's inability to dwell together that generates the split. Apparently, had they so desired, they could have found away to remain united. Rashi and Ramban's interpretations reflect these two understandings. According to Ramban, "The plain meaning of the narrative implies that the quarrel was over the cattle, since the land could not bear them and when Avraham's cattle were feeding in the meadow, Lot's shepherds would come along and feed there. Since both Avraham and Lot were strangers in the country, the former was afraid that the Canaanites and Perizites, natives of the country, would hear of the large numbers of cattle that were being pastured and would drive them out or smite them with the sword and take away their property and livestock." Ramban, based on the Torah's juxtaposition of the shepherds' quarrels with the otherwise unnecessary comment that "the Canaanite and Perizite still dwelled in the land," suggests that the objective reality of Avraham and Lot's vast wealth transformed them from harmless outsiders to an economic threat to the inhabitants.

Rashi, however, interprets the rationale for the breakup differently. He suggests that the inability to maintain unity between Avraham and Lot was not was due to the objectively large numbers

of livestock they owned, but due to Avraham's inability to co-exist with his nephew as long as Lot's shepherds violated the moral principles that motivated Avraham. The Midrash Rabba describes the situation as follows:

Avraham our father's livestock would go out to pasture muzzled, while those belonging to Lot were not muzzled. Avraham's shepherds would therefore scold them: Has robbery now become permitted? Lot's shepherds would reply: As the Holy One, Blessed be He said to Avraham, "to your descendants I will give this land," and Avraham is a barren mule who cannot produce children. As Lot will inherit him, it is ultimately their own that they are eating.

A final textual clue that possessions were the ultimate cause of the separation between Avraham and his nephew can be found in the verse describing the capture of Lot by the four kings in chapter 14.

And they took Lot, and his possessions, Avraham's nephew, and they went, for he (Lot) was dwelling in Sodom.

Syntactically, the words "Avraham's nephew" belong immediately after Lot, without the words "his possessions" between them. Once again, the Torah subtly emphasizes how material goods have separated the family.

From the beginning of Avraham's journey, the promised blessing of wealth and affluence appears chimerical. Instead of material prosperity and comfort, possessions have become a source of strife and contention within his family, and his acceptance of gifts from outsiders nearly costs him his beloved wife. How Avraham learns to deal with this issue will be the theme of our following study.

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[1] Martin Buber was the first commentator to call attention to the use of the repetition of strategic words within a text. "By 'key-word' we mean a word or a root which is repeated within a text, consecutive texts, or a series of texts in a meaningful pattern; one who carefully traces these repetitions will find one level of meaning of the text deciphered, clarified, or at least more fully revealed ... The variations of the stem word often intensify the dynamic effect of the repetition. I say 'dynamic' because the variation patterns interrelate to create a growing sense of movement as it were. One viewing the text as a whole can sense waves moving to and fro between them ..." ("The Use of the Guide Word in Biblical Stories," Martin Buber, translated from its reprinting in *Darko Shel Mikra*, pg. 284.)

[2] Ramban (12:10, s.v. *va-yehi ra'av ba-aretz*) being a noticeable exception. Here is an excerpt from his commentary:

Know that our father Avraham committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling block of sin because of fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land, concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, because of the famine, was also a sin, for in famine God would redeem him from death.

[3] The Abarbanel, whose approach encapsulates most of the commentators, phrases Avraham's conundrum as follows:

Without a doubt, it would have been preferable for the exalted one (Avraham) to choose death instead of committed this heinous act; however, if his death would serve no purpose, and the heinous act would have occurred anyways, than it was appropriate for him to try to save himself [so that he could still possibly defend Sara].

[4] Nechama Leibowitz describes this as follows (*Studies in Genesis*, p. 123):

The order of words in the verse is not accidental. Changes in emphasis, approval and disapproval and shades of meaning are not imparted, in the Torah, through long-winded psychological explanations or verbose analysis, but by a subtle syntactical device or seemingly insignificant but definitely unusual turn of phrase, combination, order, or choice of words. When they departed from Haran, Lot was an integral part of the family and their substance or property was evidently held in common. When they came back out of Egypt, however, we are confronted with the existence of two separate families ...

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