

The Finances of the Forefathers - Part 2

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Introduction to Parashat Hashavua

Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT VAYERA

The Finances of the Forefathers – Part 2

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Part 2 – Of Riches and Royalty

A. Introduction

We began our study last week analyzing the enigmatic role money plays in the Avraham narratives. Originally promised as part of the reward for Avraham's faithfulness and willingness to follow God's command to an unknown land, money complicates Avraham's life far beyond his imagination. When a famine forces Avraham to descend to Egypt, Sara is seized and taken to Pharaoh's harem. Masquerading as her brother, Avraham unwittingly finds himself the recipient of the Egyptian tyrant's largesse. Only Divine intervention compels Pharaoh to return Sara to Avraham, and he returns to Canaan laden with riches acquired through the compromise of his wife.

Almost immediately upon resettling, Avraham quickly discovers that monetary issues trigger the dissolution of his family. His nephew Lot had become independently wealthy also. Their joint prosperity quickly leads to conflict, and they cannot dwell together. Soon, all that Avraham can suggest is that Lot selects a new area to dwell in for himself, apart from him. In a revealing move, Lot chooses to dwell among the affluent yet decadent residents of Sedom. Avraham finds himself bereft of the only family member who originally accompanied Avraham on his journey to Canaan; while his affluence remains a subtle reminder of his wife's suffering in Egypt. At this point in the text (Genesis 12-13), for Avraham, money has been a curse, not a blessing.

B. Meeting the King of Sedom

The narrative spotlight (Genesis 14) switches to war its destructive aftermath. Four Babylonian kings invade Canaan to suppress a local rebellion. The kings defeat their Canaanite minions, and

plunder the country of its riches and its populace. The text makes no mention of Avraham for the first half of the chapter; it appears that Avraham has chosen the path of prudence, and is waiting for the results on the sideline. When, however, a refugee bearing the tidings of Lot's capture appears, Avraham immediately sheds any pretense of neutrality and dons the mantle of warrior chieftain. Unlike Kayin who asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Avraham responds to the news that "Lot your brother has been taken" with immediate action. Gathering soldiers and allies, Avraham bravely ventures forth in battle. Once again, the text mentions possessions, but this time, they play a much-diminished role.

And he and his servants with him fanned out against them by night, and he struck them and pursued them up to Chova (which is north of Damascus).

And he brought back all the possessions,

and Lot his kinsman also,

and his possessions he brought back; and the women and the other people as well. (15-16)

The chiasmic structure describing Avraham's return clarifies his motivations. Lot is centrally located, for Avraham's motivations were for the well-being of his relative. For Avraham, the possessions played a minor, secondary role^[1].

The story further illustrates how Avraham relates to money through the appearance of two secondary characters, the King of Sedom and Malki-Zedek, a priest to The Most High God.

And the king of Sedom went out to meet him, [after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, at the vale of Shaveh--the same is the King's Vale.]

But Malki-Zedek King of Shalem brought forth bread and wine; and he was priest of God the Most High.

And he blessed him, and said: Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth;

And blessed be God the Most High, who hath delivered yours enemies into thy hand.

And he gave him a tenth of everything.

And the King of Sedom said unto Abram: Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself.

And Abram said to the King of Sedom: I have lifted up my hand unto the LORD, God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth,

that I will take neither a thread nor a shoelace of that which is yours, lest you should say, I have made Abram rich.

Excepting only that which the young men have eaten; and as the portion of the men which went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre, let them take their portion. (17-24)

The commentators note the narrative's apparent disarray; why begin with the King of Sedom going out to greet Avraham, interrupt with the account of the Malki-Zedek, and only then return to the exchange between Avraham and the King of Sedom? Typically among their response is that of the Or HaChayim ha-Kadosh:

[The episode of Malki-Zedek is inserted here to contrast the behaviors of Malki-Zedek and the King of Sedom, and] to state the praise of the righteous, and what differentiates them from the wicked. The King of Sedom went out to greet Avraham empty-handed, despite his being indebted to him, and being required to provide him with a gift appropriate for a king. But as a wicked, miserly person, he went out empty-handed. In contrast, Malki-Zedek went forward with generosity and without obligation, to greet Avraham and the troops with bread and wine.

Interestingly, the text remains ambiguous as to who gave whom a tenth of everything, as the word 'he' from "And he gave him a tenth of everything (v. 20)" can be read as referring to either Avraham or Malki-Zedek. Radak suggests:

My father suggested that it was Malki-Zedek who transferred a tenth of the goods to Avraham, as they belonged to Avraham by law, as Avraham had exerted himself in their rescue. [This is in contrast to the behavior of] the King of Sedom, who attempted to negotiate with Avraham over the division of the spoils ... And one must wonder at those who interpret that Avraham gave a tenth of the goods of Sedom to Malki-Zedek, for how could Avraham, who refused to take any of the goods of the King of Sedom for himself, then take from them and transfer them to others?

While others follow Radak's interpretation,^[ii] the primary view among the commentators is that it was Avraham who gave tithes to Malki-Zedek.^[iii] Avraham had no guarantee of success before embarking on his campaign. Suddenly, from the mouth of an outsider, Avraham hears the fulfillment of God's original promise. He has, through his victory, become a great (in the sense of powerful) nation. His name has become source of blessing among people. It is only fitting, perhaps, that Avraham rewards Malki-Zedek with the tithe – for God promised that those who bless Avraham will be blessed. Whatever Avraham's motivations, there is no question that this scene underlies the audacious behavior of the King of Sedom. As Ramban correctly notes:

Now the King of Sedom went out to meet Avraham at the vale of Shaveh in his honor, and he accompanied him to the city of Shalem where Malki-Zedek brought out bread and wine ... the King of Sedom did not ask anything of Avraham, but when he saw his generosity and righteousness in giving the tithe to the priest, then he also asked for the people (prisoners) as a charitable request. Avraham trusted that his God will provide him with riches and honor, and did not wish to take anything from him. He returned all of the wealth of Sedom ... while the

King of Sodom had asked above all for the people, but Avraham was concerned that they should not say that they had made Avraham rich.

It is not far-fetched to suggest that Avraham's gesture of magnanimity carries several motivations. As his renown among the nations increases, so too the need to ensure that all of his actions are a reflection of God's glory and respect increases as well. This prudent gesture prevented future resentment from burgeoning among the native residents, and ensures his political independence will dwelling among them. Possibly, the constant burden of the riches he obtained from Pharaoh through deceit weighed upon Avraham's mind as well. To confirm that he will not profit from Sodom, he swears the first recorded oath in the Bible. And one can imagine what he would have said to Pharaoh had he been given the opportunity.[iv]

C. Avraham and Avimelech – Round 1

Avraham's new political fortunes do not protect him or his wife from his neighbors' lust. Upon traveling to Gerar, he once again takes the precautionary measure to announce that Sara is indeed his sister, and again, she is forcibly taken into the harem of the local ruler. This time, however, God does not immediately strike Avimelech with plagues, as he did to Pharaoh, but speaks to him directly in a dream. Unlike Pharaoh, Avimelech protests his innocence and expresses concern for his people's fate. God acknowledges Avimelech's partial innocence, but holds him accountable for the taking of Sara, for "she is the wife of a prophet." In a precedent-setting request, He orders Sara's return, so that Avraham may pray for Avimelech. The Talmudic Sages learned from this episode that while some damages are reparable through monetary payments, others are only repaired when the damager requests and receives forgiveness from the injured party (*Bava Kama* 93a). No longer will money serve as a substitute and avoidance of moral redress.

Avimelech's conversation with Avraham is notable for what they both say. Forgetting the Divine reproach he received the previous night, Avimelech challenges Avraham, "What have you done unto us? Where have I sinned against you, so that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin?" (20:9) Upon Avraham's silence, however, Avimelech adopts a more humble tone,[v] "What did you see that you did this thing? (v. 11)" To this, Avraham responds explosively:

For I thought: Surely, the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake.

Left alone, Avraham's words are a powerful indictment of his hosts' immorality and two-facedness. Their professed concern about violating the laws of adultery pales in comparison with their willingness to kill others to satiate their lusts. One could easily imagine these same words directed to Pharaoh in Egypt. However, Avraham provides a surprising second rationalization (v. 12):

Also, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not of my mother.

With this convoluted technical explanation, Avraham loses the moral high ground that he had staked out. Avimelech does not even acknowledge Avraham with a response. Instead, Avimelech makes amends through his deeds, through the compensation of Avraham with gifts, the granting to Avraham of the right to dwell anywhere he pleases, and carefully chosen words of reconciliation to Sara (v. 16):

Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of pieces; it is to be for you a '*covering of the eyes*' to all that are with you, and you are righted before all people.

In understanding the phrase "covering of the eyes," Ramban commented as follows:

He [Avimelech] said thus to Sara: "Behold, I have given much money to your brother. This money will serve you as a cause for the covering of the eyes of all those who look at your beauty, closing their eyes and the eyes of all the leaders, to prevent them from looking at you and all that belongs to you. Therefore, your being taken forcibly to my house was ultimately for your benefit, as they will fear you and cover their eyes to avoid looking at you..."

The verse tells us that Avimelech mollified Avraham with money and Sara with words, so that he should not be punished on account of either of them. However, the verse concludes *venokhachat* – as Sara did not accept his apology and was not appeased.

D. Conclusion

Despite Avraham's fumbling explanation, we find that this episode concludes more satisfactory than Sarah's capture in Egypt. Avraham is allowed to speak freely, and money becomes a form of moral recompense, not an attempt to suppress immoral behavior. Slowly, as Avraham becomes a beacon of justice and righteousness, his physical possessions become a reflection of that reality, and not a source of dividedness and compromise.

[i] Compare this to the description last week of Lot's capture (14:12), where the possessions literally interpose themselves between Lot and his family.

[ii] See Chizkuni, Rav Yosef Kara (ad. loc.) and the commentary of Ra'avad to Maimonides *Hilkhot Melakhim* 9:1.

[iii] See Rashi, Ramban (ad. loc.). We find two approaches regarding the moral question raised by Radak as to how Avraham could transfer property that was not his. Gur Aryeh suggests that Avraham gave tithes from his personal property, and not from the spoils of war. Others, based on the Talmudic

ruling (*Bava Kama* 104a) that “if one rescued possessions from heathens and robbers, they belong to him [*assuming the owners have abandoned them*]”, argue that the property was Avraham’s by right.

[iv] I am indebted to my close friend and *chaver* Rav Gad Dishy for our discussions on these topics that have helped to develop my ideas. Rav Dishy suggests an amazing series of literary links between the stories of Pharaoh and the King of Sedom that are too lengthy to list in this article.

[v] The “*Vayomer...Vaomer*” phenomenon, where the text restates that the same speaker continues speaking, has been noted by contemporary commentators as suggesting that a response that should have been supplied is missing. On this subject, see R. Elchanan Samet’s *Studies in the Weekly Parasha* vol. 1, p. 119, where he quotes Meir Shiloach’s article “*Vayomer...Vayomer*” article in *Sefer Korngreen*, p. 251. See also a posthumously published article on the subject written by Nechama Leibowitz, in *Pirkei Nechama*, p. 495.

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