

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

NO'ACH 5785

Rav Soloveitchik would often comment that from the dry formalistic halacha properly understood and interpreted, one can distill great moral truths and religious motifs. In such an exercise of halachic/homiletical exegesis, the great author of the Halachot Gedolot, R. Shimon Kayyara (9th c., Babylonia), in recording some specific halachot regarding the Lulav, indirectly alludes to a deeper understanding of the Biblical narrative which describes how Avraham chose to separate himself from his nephew, Lot.

The Torah relates that there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Avraham's cattle and those of Lot. Avraham then says to Lot: "Let there be no strife between [us]... for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? - Please part from me: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north." So, Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan... Thus, they parted from one another." (13:7-11)

The Baal Halachot Gedolot (Behag) quotes this verse (13:11) - and specifically the verb, VAYIPAR'DU - "and they separated" - in his albeit laconic discussion of a technical halachic ruling regarding the qualifi-

cations for a kosher Lulav (Siman 15, Hilchot Lulav, p. 204). In so doing, the Behag would have us examine a bit more closely the family dynamic that was unfolding between Avraham and his errant nephew. That is, if we wish to understand the nature of the split between Avraham and Lot, we would do well to study the rules that pertain to the "split-spread-dangling" leaves of the Lulav.

The Mishna rules (Sukka 3:1) that a Lulav whose leaves were severed [from the spine of the Lulav], is unfit. If its leaves, [although still attached], were spread - LIFR'DU ALAV [and are no longer completely joined to the spine], [the Lulav] is fit. Rabbi Yehuda says: [In that case], one should bind the Lulav from the top [to join the leaves that spread to the spine]." Pursuant to this Mishna, the Gemara (Sukka 32a) states: "Rav Pappa said: Severed [means that the leaves are completely detached from the spine, and one ties them to the Lulav, so] that [the Lulav] is made like a broom. Spread - LIFR'DU [means that the leaves remain attached but are merely] separated [from the spine and simply jut outward]."

Enlisting this halachic paradigm, the Behag apparently argues that Avraham chose his words carefully when, in parting from Lot, he employs the verb HIPAREID. It was as if he said: "Let us separate, but not completely sever our relationship.

Much like a kosher Lulav, whose leaves are spread out at the top, but remain connected at the root, with our differences notwithstanding, we remain kinsmen, joined together at our familial root. And as such, I will be there for you as a shield and protector." And indeed, this is exactly how Avraham responds when Lot is taken captive by K'dorla-omer (14:12). Avraham pledges to remain "attached", as it were, to Lot despite their parting of ways.

However, there would be one important condition to ensure the stability of this fraternal relationship. Once again, we turn to the halacha: If the jutting-out palm branches above harden so that they cannot be at least theoretically bound together, the Lulav would be invalid. The message here is equally important. A wholesome family bond not only finds expression in its common ancestry and identity - blood relationships are indeed very strong and enduring, but a family merges, binds together also by virtue of their ideals that define the uniqueness of that family. When the top leaves of the Lulav adhere and can be joined, it underscores the common values and goals that are shared by the family members.

Here too, we detect that for all of Lot's delinquencies, there were certain moral principles that remained firm and unyielding. If Avraham's defining virtue was chesed

(Micha 7:20), then Lot almost innately emulated his great uncle by demonstrating such chesed-hospitality to his angelic guests even while risking the fury of his Sodomite neighbors (B'reishit 19:2-3). And later, in the wake of the destruction of Sodom and Amora, the Torah relates that HaShem remembered Avraham and saved Lot (19:29). The Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 51:6) explains exactly what it was that Gd remembered about Avraham that merited Lot's rescue. "[While in Egypt], Lot was aware that Sarah was Avraham's wife and yet when he heard Avraham declare Sarah as his sister, he did not reveal the matter... Therefore, HaShem had pity on him." As the Rav Soloveitchik explains, Lot was fascinated by his uncle and revered him greatly, and therefore, even as he was unfortunately overtaken by the boundless fantasies and hedonistic pleasures of a depraved Sodomite culture, he nevertheless remained loyal to those noble family traits that so exemplified the life of Avraham and Sarah.

Because Lot never completely severs his relationship with his uncle, he manages to retain and then transmit many of Avraham's great moral virtues to his two daughters. The Rav beautifully expands upon this fact in his comments on the verse, "And all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you [Avraham]" (12:3). The

Talmud states (Y'vamot 63a): "I have two goodly shoots to graft on to you [Avraham]: Ruth the Moavite and Naama the Ammonite." Ruth, a descendant of Moav, would be the mother of the Davidic dynasty (Ruth 4:17). Naama, a descendant of Ammon, would be the mother of Rehavam (Melachim I 14:21). Together, the Mashi'ach will be a descendant of David, Shlomo and Rechavam. Lot's daughters, who gave birth to Moav and Ammon, both contributed to the emerging personality of the Melech HaMashi'ach.

Parenthetically, in this regard, there is a critically important halacha, based upon a fascinating discussion in the Talmud (Bava Batra 133b) which rules that a father may not disinherit a wayward son. True, the son, because of his misbehavior, may not deserve the bequest, but nevertheless, the father was instructed not to do so. Either because it would generate dissension and animosity within the family, or because by so alienating the son, the father will have precluded his son's descendants from ever returning to the fold. To put it quite bluntly, one should never "sit shiva" for a sinful child.

What emerges then from this depiction of Avraham's relationship with Lot is the enormous potency of healthy family interactions. Indeed, the laboratory in which the ethics of justice and compassion, chesed and

goodness are best nurtured and cultivated is the family home. Or, as the Behag might have taught: A home where principles are taught in an atmosphere of love and respect is a home that will powerfully impact the lives of all its members even if they "separate" one from another. "Separate", yes, but so long as they are joined at the root and plaited together at the top in common objective and purpose - such a family becomes a building block in the grand edifice of the Messianic dynasty!

In a word, what begins with a morally wholesome nuclear family can - with Gd's help - eventually expand outward to characterize and distinguish an entire people. And that, B"H, we have witnessed in the wake of the October 7th tragedy where although the "palm leaves may have separated" - that notwithstanding our many differences - we, as a people, have exhibited amazing devotion and allegiance to our roots and our destiny! We did not, thank Gd, "detach" one from another!

It should now come as no surprise then that HaShem's initial blessing to Avraham was to state that "all the families" - not individuals, not nations, but families - "shall be blessed in you." Blessings come through families, that precious unit-gem of humanity that will ultimately guarantee its redemption. 🙌