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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

DOES HALAKHAH VALUE EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND ORDINARY HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS?

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Rav Yisroel Salanter famously said that “We should worry about our own *ruchniyus* (spiritual being) and everyone else’s *gashmiyus* (physical being).” This is an ethical rather than a halakhic statement. There are numerous halakhic requirements to look after our own *gashmiyus*, such as *venishmartem meod lenafshoteikhem*, and other people’s *ruchniyus*, such as *lifnei iver* (placing a metaphorical stumbling block in front of the spiritually blind). But we should always look for the **influence** of ethics on halakhah, descriptively and prescriptively.

The point of Rav Yisroel’s statement is to oppose paternalism. We should provide for other people’s physical needs without asking whether hunger would be better for their souls than food security. The halakhic parallel, addressed by many poskim, is whether one is allowed to give food to poor people who won’t say *berakhot* before eating it. The formal question is whether this constitutes a violation of *lifnei iver*; under the influence of Rav Yisroel’s ethics we should look hard for ways to say that it isn’t.

This is not at all the same question as whether one can invite non-observant Jews to a Shabbat meal if they will drive home. The formal frame there is often whether the possibility of kiruv outweighs the immediate violation, in other words exclusively about the other person’s *ruchniyus*. So perhaps Rav Yisroel should drive us to look hard for ways to forbid this.

But there are other informal ways to think about the question. Maybe there is a value per se in fostering Shabbat as a social space for all Jews, even if no one will thereby become more observant. Maybe there are relationships that matter (or might come to matter) emotionally to both of us, yet will wither if we can’t spend Shabbat meals together. Are the emotional goods of friendship, family, and community part of *gashmiyus*, or *ruchniyus*?

My narrative frame for this question is the story of Avraham and Lot.

Parshat Lekh Lekha opens with G-d telling Avram that he must leave his homeland, his natal culture, and his father’s household if he wants to achieve greatness. Greatness is over the horizon in “the land that I will show you.” Avram promptly leaves homeland and culture, but brings his nephew (meaning: his father’s grandson) Lot along. The result is that his horizon of greatness recedes. G-d shows him the land only

אחרי הפרד לוט מעמו

after Lot separated from being with him.

Rashi goes further:

כל זמן שהרשע עמו –

היה הדיבור פורש הימנו

the entire time that the wicked one was with him -
the experience of G-d’s speech disengaged from him.

Lot’s presence caused a sustained decline in the quality of Avram’s *ruchniyus*.

Was Avram aware this was happening? If yes, did he make the right choice?

Abravanel makes clear that Avram was emotionally bonded with Lot, and hints that Avram was aware that Lot’s presence was problematic. G-d showed Avram the land after Lot’s departure in order to console him:

ולפי שאברהם בהפרדות לוט הרגיש צער ועצבון

מפני הקורבה שהיתה ביניהם,

ושלא נשאר לו זולתו מכל בית אביו –

לכן באתהו הנבואה לשמחו...

because Avraham experienced suffering and deep sadness at Lot’s separation
because of the closeness between them,

and because no one aside from him was left to him **from all his father’s
household** –

therefore the prophecy came to him to cheer him up...

R. Yitzchak Arama (the Akeidat Yitzchak) goes further. The fight among the shepherds did not “just happen”; rather, it was Hashem’s way of pushing Avram to make the final break.

– והנה אחר שאברהם לא נתן אל לבו להפריד את לוט ממנו –

הוא ית' סבב סבת הפרוד במה שלא נשאה הארץ אותם.

– ויהי ריב בין רועי מקנה אברם ובין רועי מקנה לוט –

כי לא תאונה לצדיק עוד חברתו,

כאשר נצטוה מתחלה להתרחק מבית אביו לגמרי

After Avraham did not have it in his heart to separate Lot from him
He the Blessed brought about the separation via having the land “unable to
bear them (dwelling together)”

So there was a dispute between the shepherds of Avram’s flocks
and the shepherds of Lot’s flocks –

so that the righteous one (Avram) would no longer happen upon his
companionship

as he was initially commanded to distance himself utterly from his father's household

Or HaChayyim sees both possibilities.

עוד ירצה לומר שילך לו מארצו,
אך לא יהיה כסדר יציאתו מאור כשדים שיוליך עמו מולדתו ובית אביו,
אלא הוא לבדו יעזוב ארצו,
ויפרד גם ממולדתו, ואפילו מבית אביו.
אך אברהם לא הבין זה בדברי ה', ולקח עמו לוט.
או אפשר שהבין כן, אלא שלוט דבק בו
כאומר וילך אתו לוט - דבק בו.
והגם שאמר אחר כך ויקח אברם וגו' ואת לוט וגו' - פירוש שלא דחפו,
עד שימצא המצאה שלא יכלימהו.
ולזה תמצא כי כשמצא סיבה קטנה שרבו הרועים - תיכף אמר אליו -
הפרד וגו' אם הימין וגו',
והדבר הוא כמעט זר שיאמר אליו כדברים האלה בכל כך הרחקה,
אלא לצד שהיה חושב מחשבות להפרידו כדבר ה' -
לזה תכף במוצאו סיבה דחפו בב' ידים.

(The original command) meant that (Avram) should leave his homeland but not in the way he left Ur Kasdim, taking along his natal culture and his father's household, but rather he alone should depart his land, and also he should separate from his natal culture, and even from his father's household.

But Avraham did not understand this in the words of Hashem, so he took Lot along with him.

Or possibly he did understand this, but Lot stuck to him, as Scripture says Lot went with him, (meaning) he stuck to him and although Scripture says afterward Avram took... and Lot - this means that he didn't push him away until he found an occasion that would not humiliate him.

Thus you find that when Avraham found a slight reason, that the shepherds quarreled -

He immediately said to him: Separate, please... if you choose the righthand side...

It is almost weird for him to say the words to him with such alienating force, unless he was already thinking about how to separate him in accordance with Hashem's words - therefore, as soon as he found a reason, he pushed him away with both hands.

Or Hachayyim's interpretation is difficult to translate into Halakhah. Once you understand what G-d requires of you, don't you have to follow it immediately? But perhaps we can say that humiliating someone else is the equivalent of killing them, and so Avraham had to wait for an excuse.

The sixteenth century commentator Ma'asei Hashem does not find this explanation convincing. Rather:

כי מה שנאמר וילך אתו לוט -
הוא כאילו יאמר שהוא לא לקח אותו עמו ולא פיתה אותו,
כי היתה כוונתו שלא ילך אחד ממשפחתו עמו,
כאשר צוה אותו השם יתברך.
אבל כאשר לוט מעצמו בחר ללכת עמו -
לא היה יכול לעכב עליו מלבוא תחת כנפי השכינה,
ולכך נאמר שלקח אותו עמו:

when Scripture says Lot went along with him - it is as if it said that Avram did not take Lot with him, or entice him, because his intent was that no one from his family would go with him, as Hashem the Blessed had commanded him.

But once Lot chose **on his own** to go along with him - Avram was not able to prevent him from coming under the wings of the Presence, and therefore Scripture says that he took Lot along with him.

For Maasei Hashem, what justifies taking Lot along is an ethical imperative not to interfere with someone else's spiritual growth, even at the expense of one's own. This is not in conflict with Rav Yisroel's principle because it is not paternalistic; Avram does this only because Lot **chooses to come on his own**. Contrast this with Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, who writes (Kovetz Teshuvot HaRav Elyashiv 3:185):

כל עוד ואברהם אבינו חשב לתועלת - טיפל בו
אף שידע שבגלל זה נפסק ממנו הדיבור,
כלומר הקריב גם הרחוניות שלו בגלל מטרה זו לפרסם מלכות שמים
בעולם

So long as Avraham Avinu thought it was purposeful - he engaged with Lot, even though he knew that because of this, the Divine Word had been cut off from him

meaning that he sacrificed even his ruchniyus for the sake of this goal, to publicize the kingdom of Heaven in the world

Perhaps Rav Elyashiv can also be read non-paternalistically, but there is something paradoxical in saying that one sacrifices one's *ruchniyus* to achieve one's own spiritual priority.

What I am missing in all these explanations, with the possible explanation of Avraham, is the value of Avraham and Lot's relationship as such, to each of them. I'm also missing the category of loyalty. Lot chose to go with Avram on a journey to an unknown land, and he seems to have accompanied him through a dangerous adventure in Egypt. Aside from Lot's spiritual growth, does Avraham owe Lot loyalty? Are Avraham and Lot better able to cope with the distractions, frustrations, and crises of ordinary life because they have each other to talk to? Does Lot's presence make Avraham better able to live up to his own ideals of interpersonal character and behavior? Might that be worth being on a prophecy diet (many commentators point out that Hashem does convey messages to Avram before this; they're just terser)?

There are many ways in which these ethical questions translate into halakhah. The most obvious cases are those of married couples in which one party grows more interested in observance, but they come up in some way in almost every human relationship. They also affect the ways in which we construct those relationships both individually and communally. I can think of no better way to end an essay on the value of relationships than by saying: "We need to talk about this."

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