

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Mark Twain said it most pithily. “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

Whether Freud was right or wrong about the Oedipus complex, there is surely this much truth to it, that the power and pain of adolescence is that we seek to define ourselves as different, individuated, someone other than our parents. When we were young they were the sustaining presence in our lives, our security, our stability, our source of groundedness in the world.

The first and deepest terror we have as very young children is separation anxiety: the absence, especially, of the mother. Young children will play happily so long as mother or care-giver is within sight. Absent that, and there is panic. We are too young to venture into the world on our own. It is precisely the stable, predictable presence of parents in our early years that gives us a basic sense of trust in life.

But then comes the time as we approach adulthood, when we have to learn to make our own way in the world. Those are the years of searching and in some cases, rebellion. They are what make adolescence so fraught. The Hebrew word for youth – the root n-a-r – has these connotations of ‘awakening’ and ‘shaking.’ We begin to define ourselves by reference to our friends, our peer-group, rather than our family. Often there is tension between the generations.

The literary theorist Harold Bloom wrote two fascinating books, *The Anxiety of Influence* and *Maps of Misreading*, in which, in Freudian style, he argued that strong poets make space for themselves by deliberately misinterpreting or misunderstanding their predecessors. Otherwise – if you were really in awe of the great poets that came before you – you would be stymied by a sense that everything that could be said has been said, and better than you could possibly do.

Creating the space we need to be ourselves often involves an adversarial relationship to those who came before us, and that includes our parents.

One of the great discoveries that tends to come with age is that we begin to realise that having spent what seems like a lifetime of running away from our parents, we find that we have become very much like them – and the further away we ran, the closer we became. Hence the truth in Mark Twain’s insight. It needs time and distance to see how much we owe our parents and how much of them lives on in us.

The way the Torah does this in relation to Abraham (or Abram as he was then called) is remarkable in its subtlety. *Lekh Lekha*, and indeed Jewish history, begins with the words, “G-d said to Abraham, Go from your land, your birthplace and your father’s house to a land I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). This is the boldest beginning of any account of a life in the Hebrew Bible. It seems to come from nowhere. The Torah gives us no portrait of Abraham’s childhood, his youth, his relationship with the other members of his family, how he came to marry Sarah, or the qualities of character that made G-d single him out to become the initiator of what ultimately turned out to be the greatest revolution in the religious history of humankind, what is called nowadays Abrahamic monotheism.

It was this biblical silence that led to the midrashic tradition almost all of us learned as children, that Abraham broke the idols in his father’s house. This is Abraham the Revolutionary, the iconoclast, the man of new beginnings who overturned everything his father stood for. This is, if you like, Freud’s Abraham.

Perhaps it is only as we grow older that we are able to go back and read the story again, and realise the significance of the passage at the end of the previous parsha. It says this: “Terach took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there” (Gen. 11:31).

It turns out, in other words, that Abraham left his father’s house long after he had left his land and his birthplace. His birthplace was in Ur, in what is today southern Iraq, but he only separated from his father in Harran, in what is now northern Syria. Terach, Abraham’s father, accompanied him for the first half of his journey. He went with his son at least part of the



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way.

What actually happened? There are two possibilities. The first is that Abraham received his call in Ur. His father Terach then agreed to go with him, intending to accompany him to the land of Canaan, though he did not complete the journey, perhaps because of age. The second is that the call came to Abraham in Harran, in which case his father had already begun the journey on his own initiative by leaving Ur. Either way, the break between Abraham and his father was far less dramatic than we first thought.

I have argued elsewhere (in my new book, *Not in G-d's Name*), that biblical narrative is far more subtle than we usually take it to be. It is deliberately written to be understood at different levels at different stages in our moral growth. There is a surface narrative. But there is also, often, a deeper story that we only come to notice and understand when we have reached a certain level of maturity (I call this the concealed counter-narrative). Genesis 11-12 is a classic example.

When we are young we hear the enchanting – indeed empowering – story of Abraham breaking his father's idols, with its message that a child can sometimes be right and a parent wrong, especially when it comes to spirituality and faith. Only much later in life do we hear the far deeper truth – hidden in the guise of a simple genealogy at the end of the previous parsha – that Abraham was actually completing a journey his father began.

There is a line in the book of Joshua (24:2) – we read it as part of the Haggadah on Seder night – that says that “In the past your ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates River, including Terach the father of Abraham and Nahor. They worshiped other gods.” So there was idolatry in Abraham's family background. But Genesis 11 says that it was Terach who took Abraham, not Abraham who took Terach, from Ur to go to the land of Canaan. There was no immediate and radical break between father and son.

Indeed it is hard to imagine how it could have been otherwise. Abram – Abraham's original name – means “mighty father”. Abraham himself was chosen “so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19) –

that is, he was chosen to be a model parent. How could a child who rejected the way of his father become a father of children who would not reject his way in turn?¹ It makes more sense to say that Terach already had doubts about idolatry and it was he who inspired Abraham to go further, spiritually and physically. Abraham continued a journey his father had begun, thereby helping Isaac and Jacob, his son and grandson, to chart their own ways of serving G-d – the same G-d but encountered in different ways.

Which brings us back to Mark Twain. Often we begin by thinking how different we are from our parents. It takes time for us to appreciate how much they helped us become the people we are. Even when we thought we were running away, we were in fact continuing their journey. Much of what we are is because of what they were. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all of his possessions, and Lot went next to him to the Negev." (Gen. 13:1) The portion of Lech Lecha is a kaleidoscope of intriguing and exciting sequences—from the attempted rape of Sarah in Egypt to inter-family conflict to a major war to G-d's mysterious covenant with Abraham. Are these disparate stories held together only by a time-line, or is there a conceptual scheme placing them in a higher context? I believe that an examination of the portion's seven sub-divisions, or *aliyot*, will provide the uniting theme as well as Israel's most important—though often overlooked—role among the nations (see Elhanan Samet's *Biblical Commentary*).

The portion opens with G-d's command to Abram to move to the Land of Israel: "I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you, and I shall make your name great; you shall be a blessing. I shall bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I shall curse; all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:2-3). G-d is here promising Abram two things: national development and a spiritual greatness that will encompass the world. Abram is presented as a world leader who will influence all the families of the earth. After all, he is already teaching his future generations "compassionate righteousness and moral justice" (Gen. 18:18, 19). The Vilna Gaon suggests that the phrase usually translated "I shall curse" (Hebrew *a'or*) might actually mean "I will show the light" (or is light in Hebrew). Israel is to be a light unto the nations, a kingdom of priest/teachers who bring the message of ethical monotheism to the world.

¹ Rashi (to Gen. 11:31) says it was to conceal the break between son and father that the Torah records the death of Terach before G-d's call to Abraham. However, see Ramban *ad loc.*

Abram desperately requires progeny for both of these mandates. And so the barren Abram and Sarai place their hope for the future in Lot, Abram's deceased brother's son. Hence the Bible records-in the verse following the blessing and the charge-"And Abram went in accordance with the way the Lord spoke to him, and Lot went with him... And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot the son [of his brother] and all the wealth they had acquired... " (Gen. 12:4-5). But then came the famine and the sojourn in Egypt. Our text (second aliya) highlights Egyptian exile as being fraught with both physical danger (Sarai is seized) and spiritual danger (the materialistic blandishments of Egypt). The Hebrew family survives the near-rape intact, but Egypt seems to have had a corrosive effect on Lot: "And Abram came up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that were his, and Lot next to him..." (Gen. 13:1).

This is very different from when the family first set out for Israel: then, Lot was mentioned right after Abram and Sarai (that is, before their possessions), and went with Abram physically and spiritually (ito) and not merely in physical proximity (imo), as here. At this juncture, however, the change in Lot is merely hinted at. The next aliya, which begins "And also Lot, going with Abram, had sheep, cattle and tents... And the land was not sufficient to carry both of them" (Gen. 13:5-6), leaves no room for doubt. Israel has become too small for the two of them-Abram's mission isn't materialistic enough for Lot, who has no desire to perfect the world; he wants to own it! So he leaves Abram's land and Lot in favor of the lush, Egypt-like Sodom to pursue materialism rather than spirituality, momentary vice rather than monumental vision.

The great message of Abraham's new name (earned in Gen. 17:5) is his universal mission ("Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee"). Hence, the second aliya concludes with "And Abram called out [to humanity] there with the name of the Lord" (Gen. 13:4), and the third aliya concludes with, "And Abram built there an altar to the Lord" (Gen. 13:18). The fourth aliya deals with Melchizedek (identified by the Midrash as Shem, son of Noah), the king of Jerusalem, who recognizes the universal G-d of peace. And the rest of the portion deals with G-d's covenant with Abraham-His promise of an heir who will make Abraham's progeny light the world like the stars of heaven. The structure and content of our Torah portion teach us why and how Lot cannot be considered a suitable heir for Abraham's mission.

We must wait many generations for Lot's return to the fold, in the person of his descendant Ruth (offspring of Moab, the son born to Lot and his daughter).

Apparently G-d has cosmic patience, and so must we, if we are to be His emissaries. ©2015 Ohr

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The pattern for the life of our father Abraham and our mother Sarah is set in the opening word's of this week's Torah reading. They, the progenitors of the Jewish people and the parents of all nations are destined to be travelers for all of their lives. The truth is that all of us are travelers on the journey of our lives. The difference is whether we have a clear idea of our destination and even more importantly what path to take in order to arrive there.

G-d assures Abraham and Sarah that Heaven will accompany them on their journey. But the Lord does not forecast the events, the twists and turns, the detours and stumbling blocks that will mark the path of their journey. How to cope with those unforeseen and mostly untoward events is left up to the wisdom, tactics and actions of Abraham and Sarah themselves.

At the same time they are to remember that the focus of their lives is the goal of their relationship with their Creator and the task of creating a family and a nation that will guide civilization towards that same goal. The Torah itself states that Abraham 'saw the place from afar.'

'The place' refers to that goal of the relationship to G-d and the acquisition of the holy spirit which allows one to lead a meaningful and productive life. But the goal is always seen 'from afar.' Nevertheless, the pursuit of the goal is mandatory upon Abraham, Sarah and their descendants even if in many instances the goal is deemed to be unachievable.

The Jewish people have wandered over the face of this globe for millennia. They always knew that they would return to the Land of Israel one day no matter how distant or unachievable that that day may have appeared. The example of Abraham and Sarah has always stood before the eyes of the Jewish people as the paradigm of their national experience.

It is reported that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov constantly stated: "Every step that I take on the face of this earth is towards Jerusalem." G-d did not choose to inform Abraham as to how he would reach his life's destination. Human beings have elaborate plans, Google maps, detailed itineraries and many ideas as how to arrive at their sought after destinations. Sometimes all of these plans do work out on schedule and successfully. But many times Heaven mocks our futile efforts at controlling our destiny.

We state in our daily prayers that "many are the thoughts and plans that lie in the hearts of humans, but only the wisdom and advice of G-d will prevail." The greatness of character of our father and mother, Abraham and Sarah, is reflected in how they dealt with the vagaries of life, the disappointments and certainly the tragedies, while not losing sight of the goal and

ultimate purpose of life itself.

The importance of keeping Abraham and Sarah constantly in the forefront of our minds and plans is of inestimable value in negotiating one's journey through life. ©2015 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Terah, Avraham's father, is often viewed as an evil man and nothing more than an idol worshipper. A review of the text indicates otherwise. First of all, Terah's son, Haran, dies during Terah's lifetime. The Torah's description of his demise – "in the face of his father Terah" – expresses Terah's deep pain. (Genesis 11:28) This is certainly understandable. After all, the way of the world is that children sit shiva for parents, not the reverse.

Second of all, Terah acts with great responsibility toward his family. Rather than leaving Haran's child Lot to be raised by others, Terah takes him in. This is truly a noble deed, especially when considering the pain Terah felt upon losing his own child. Notwithstanding this suffering, Terah has the inner strength to raise his grandchild as his own. (Genesis 11:31)

Third of all, Terah seems to understand the importance of the land of Israel. Years before Avraham is commanded by G-d to go to the Holy Land, Terah decides on his own to do so. He instinctively recognizes the centrality of Israel. (Genesis 11:31)

Finally, Terah must have been a man of considerable spiritual energy. Consider his three children: Avraham, of course, would become the first patriarch. Nahor's granddaughter was Rebecca who would become the second matriarch. And Haran's son, Lot, fathers Moav from whom Ruth and King David were born, and from whom the Messiah will one day emerge.

Of course, Terah was no Avraham. G-d does not speak to him. He sets out to the land of Israel but never arrives. Still, the Torah, as it begins the narrative about Avraham and Sarah, seems to underscore the contribution that Terah makes to the development of the people of Israel.

Unfortunately, it is too often the case that successful children forget the roles their parents played in shaping their personalities and careers. It shouldn't be this way. Children should always be aware of the seeds planted by their parents and grandparents.

Thus, it is important that we appreciate Terah, the father of the Jewish people. He was the foundation from which the patriarchs and matriarchs emerged. Hence his name, Terah –from the word ruach, spirit.

Indeed, it was from Terah, whose name begins with the letter taf, which denotes future, that Am Yisrael would be born. ©2015 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT" L

Bais Hamussar

When Avraham was already an elderly man, he received the long awaited tiding that he would bear children. The Torah tells us, "He believed in Hashem and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Bereishis 15:6). Rashi explains that the fact that he believed that he would bear children was a merit. The Ramban contends that there must be a different explanation because Avraham heard a prophecy directly from Hashem to this end, so what was so great about the fact that He believed what he heard straight from G-d? The Maharal counters that perfect belief isn't so simple because we find that even Moshe was taken to task after hitting the rock as the pasuk tells us, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the nation..." (Bamidbar 20:12). In light of this, Avraham's total belief was indeed meritorious.

Rav Wolbe (Shiurei Chumash, Noach 7:7, Alei Shur vol. II pg. 338) elaborates that there are many levels of emunah. While we might refer to emunah simply as believing that there is a Creator, this is only the most basic level of emunah. The Torah is discussing a much greater level of emunah. Avraham believed in Hashem that he would bear children when all of nature belied such a possibility. He and his wife were well past their childbearing years, and moreover, Chazal tell us that Sarah did not even have the physical organs needed to bear children! The scientific impossibility did not sway Avraham even an iota from complete faith in what he was told.

In contrast, in Parshas Noach we read how Noach was forced into the teivah by the rainwater heralding the beginning of the deluge. Rashi (Bereishis 7:7) comments that Noach was lacking in emunah. He did not believe with full certainty that the flood would come, and consequently, he did not enter the teivah until the intensity of the rains precluded the possibility of him staying outside. He, too, had received his information regarding the future via a prophecy directly from Hashem. Nevertheless, he needed to experience something tangible in order to truly believe that the prophecy would come to fruition.

One who possesses total belief in Hashem's word, believes in everything Hashem said even if he has not heard the prophecy himself. His belief is so ironclad that he is even willing to put his life on the line should the need arise. The Gemara (Gittin 56b) relates that during the siege of Yerushalayim just prior to the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash, R'

Yochanan ben Zakkai arranged a secret meeting between himself and the Roman general Vespasian. As they met, he extended his greetings,

"Peace unto you, king." Vespasian replied that such a greeting warrants the death penalty because it implied that he had rebelled against the reigning emperor and wished to coronate Vespasian in his stead! R' Yochanan replied that indeed he must be a king, because Chazal inferred from a pasuk that the Bais Hamikdosh would be destroyed only by a king. (Immediately thereafter, a messenger arrived from Rome with the news that the emperor had died and the higher echelons in the Roman government decided to coronate Vespasian as his successor!) The fact that R' Yochanan saw a general in front of him did not influence his behavior in any fashion. He was willing to valiantly address Vespasian as king; knowing that had he erred, his mistake would be fatal.

This idea has many practical applications for every one of us, and is especially relevant in light of the terror attacks in Israel. Earlier in this week's parsha, after the war with the four kings, we read how Avraham agreed to accept payment for the food eaten by the soldiers who fought the war and those who sat watching the vessels. Rashi infers that those who fought in battle and those who manned the base received equal portions of the spoils. Accordingly, David Hamelech would apportion the spoils of the battles that he fought, in a similar fashion.

Why do they both deserve the same amount of booty? Doesn't the soldier fighting the war deserve more than those sitting effortlessly at the base? Rav Wolbe (Shiurei Chumash, Lech Lecha 14:24) cites the meforshim in Shmuel (I, 30:24) who explain that soldiers only deserve more if they are fighting a "natural" war. However, when wars are fought by Hashem, it makes no difference who puts in more or less effort, so long as each person is doing what is incumbent upon him to do. Thus, while the soldiers are the ones holding the weapons, it is us who have the ability to bring them (and all the civilians) home safely each night. If our emunah would be concrete and we genuinely believed that, although it appears as if the guns decide the outcome, the truth is that our Torah and tefillah call the shots, then our prayers would be with an intensity that rivals the intensity of a soldier in battle! ©2015 Ravi S. Wolbe & The AishDas Society

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states, "And he (Avraham) trusted in G-d, and G-d reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Why was Avraham's trust in G-d considered to be righteousness? If G-d spoke to any of us, would we not have an unshakable faith? We do not have faith that there is a moon or that two plus two equals four. That which we see or understand does not

require an act of faith.

The answer was given by Rabbi Mordechai of Lechovitz, who cited the Talmud that on a person's Judgment Day he will be asked, "Did you transact in faith?" (Talmud Bavli, Shabbos 31a). This is usually understood as asking whether one transacted business honestly.

Rabbi Mordechai said that it has an additional meaning. When a person transacts in business, he negotiates and tries in every way to maximize his profit. He does not settle for a meager gain. This is what one will be asked on Judgment Day: "Did you transact in faith? i.e., did you do everything possible to maximize your faith, or did you just accept whatever you were given?"

Abraham transacted in faith. He, of course, knew there was a G-d. He did not have to have faith in His existence. However, he tried to strengthen his faith by coming to an ever greater knowledge of G-d, and believing even that which they could not see about G-d.

Some people take their faith in G-d for granted. Of course they believe that there is a G-d. However, they may not have gone beyond that to try to know more and more about G-d. We have great works available to us to increase our knowledge and therefore our faith and understanding of G-d. If we fail to do so, we will have no answer on Judgment Day when we are asked, "Did you seek to improve the quality of your faith? Did you transact in faith?" *Dvar Torah based on Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2015 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Long Distance Call

Good deeds deserve good dividends, but there is one deed mentioned in this week's portion that is veiled in anonymity. However, its dividends lasted so forcefully that the impact was realized almost 500 years later.

The Torah tells us about a war that took place. Avram's nephew Lot was captured. The Torah tells us "Then there came the fugitive and told Abram, the Ivri, who dwelt in the plains of Mamre..." (Genesis 14:13) It obscures the name of the refugee and does not even directly state his message. The next verse, in a seemingly disjointed manner, tells us, "and Abram heard that his kinsman was taken captive, he armed his disciples who had been born in his house -- three hundred and eighteen -- and he pursued them as far as Dan" (ibid v.14). The Medrash tells us that the refugee was Og, a giant of a man who escaped an attack on his fellow giants. He informed Avram that his nephew was alive, albeit taken prisoner with malevolent intent. He figured that Avram would try to liberate Lot and be killed in battle. Og would then marry Sora. (Perhaps that is the reason that the Torah seems to separate what Avram heard from what the refugee told.) For this piece

of disguised information, Og receives a seemingly disproportionate reward. He is granted not only longevity, as he lived until the final days of the Jews' sojourn through the desert, but also the impact of his deed was so potent that Moshe was afraid to attack him before entering the Land of Canaan! Imagine. Og lived for 470 years after the deed, and then Moshe had to be reassured that he need not fear his merits!

Rabbi Berel Zisman, one of the few remaining from his illustrious family of prominent Lubavitch Chasidim spent a portion of World War II in a concentration camp in Munich. After the war, he was allowed entry to the United States, but had to wait in the town of Bremerhaven for six weeks. During that time he decided to travel to Bergen-Belsen the notorious concentration camp which was transformed to a displaced person camp to visit a cousin who was there. Dozens of inmates came over to him with names of loved ones scattered across the free plains of the USA. They wanted to get them messages. Berel took their messages. To Sam Finkel from Abraham Gorecki: "I am alive and recuperating. Please try to guarantee employment to allow me to enter the US." And so on. One card was for Jacob Kamenecki from a niece from Minsk. "Please be aware that I survived the war and will be going back to Minsk."

Armed with lists of names and some addresses, Berel arrived in the US where he became a student in the Lubavitch Yeshiva in Crown Heights. Knowing no English, upon his arrival he asked a cousin to address postcards. Each had a message written in Yiddish "My name is Berel Zisman. I have just arrived from Europe -- and have regards from..." He filled in the blanks and ended the brief note on each card with, "for further information, I can be contacted at the Lubavitch Yeshiva, corner Bedford and Dean in Crown Heights."

Rabbi Zisman does not really know how many people received his cards, but one person who lived in a basement apartment on Hewes Street definitely did. When Rabbi Jacob Kamenecki, one of the United States' leading sages, came to the Lubavitch yeshiva looking for Berel Zisman, a war refugee who had arrived at the yeshiva only a week ago, no one knew why.

Berel was called out of the study hall and met the elderly man, filled him in on all the particulars about the status of his relative, and returned to his place. When the young man returned to his seat, he was shocked at the celebrity treatment he once again received. "You mean you don't know who that Rabbi was? He is the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Voda'ath!" Berel shuddered, feeling terrible that he made the revered scholar visit him. A while later, he met the Rosh Yeshiva and approached him. "Rebbe, please forgive me, I had no intention to make you come to me to get regards. Had I known who you were I would surely have gone to your home and given the information to

you in person!"

Reb Yaakov was astounded. He refused to accept the apology. "Heaven forbid! Do you realize what kind of solace I have hearing about the survival of my relative. I came to you, not only to hear the news, but to thank you, in person, for delivering it!"

Imagine. Avram was nearly 80 years old, he had no descendants, and the only link to the house of his father's family -- at least documented as a disciple of Avram's philosophies -- was Lot. Now even the whereabouts and future of that man were unknown. And when Og delivered the news of his whereabouts, perhaps Avram's hope for the future was rekindled. Perhaps his gratitude toward Og abounded. And though Og spoke one thing, and Avram heard another, the reward for the impact on Avram's peace of mind was amazingly powerful.

We often make light of actions and ramifications. The Torah tells us this week, in a saga that ends five books and some four hundred years later, that small tidings travel a very long distance.

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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**W**hether a string or a shoe strap, I will [not] take anything that is yours" (B'reishis 14:23).

Avra[ha]m refused to keep any of the property he took possession of when he defeated the four kings (who had taken the possessions of the people of Sodom and its neighboring cities), even though "to the victor belong the spoils." However, when Avraham went down to Egypt, he asked his wife to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister "so that they will be good to me on your behalf" (12:13), which Rashi tells us means that they will "give me gifts." Why did Avraham accept the items that Pharaoh gave him (see Rashi on 12:16), yet be unwilling to keep the items he legally owned, returning them to their original owner (Sodom) instead?

One obvious difference is that Pharaoh gave him these gifts willingly (even if under false pretenses), and refusing to accept them likely would have caused animosity (defeating the purpose of not revealing that Sara [Sarai] was his wife), whereas the king of Sodom considered the possessions his (or wrongly taken from him, even if it wasn't Avraham who took them from him), so his offer to let Avraham keep them was made reluctantly (see Or Hachayim on 14:23). Although this only addresses his willingness to accept Pharaoh's gifts while refusing to keep the possessions that originally belonged to Sodom, and not why Avraham seemed to have wanted the Egyptians to give him gifts in the first place, there are reasons why Avraham would want the Egyptians to be good to him (if nothing else, some who might have tried to harm him would refrain from doing so after seeing how well others treat him, see Gur

Aryeh on 12:13). Therefore, since Pharaoh really wanted Avraham to keep his gifts (especially after seeing how G-d miraculously protected his wife, see Rashi on 12:17), while the king of Sodom did not, Avraham refused to keep the possessions that had originally belonged to Sodom even though he seemed to have no issue with keeping Pharaoh's gifts. Nevertheless, a plethora of suggestions have been made to explain why Avraham was willing to accept Pharaoh's gifts (and even wanted them) but gave Sodom (et al) all of their possessions back.

Sifsay Chachamim (12:13) offers three answers. First he differentiates between small gifts and large gifts, with small gifts being room and board, which was fine for Avraham, a guest in a foreign country (Egypt), to accept, and large gifts, which is what the possessions of Sodom would have constituted (as evidenced by Avraham saying that he didn't want the king of Sodom to say that he made Avraham rich). However, we are told that Avraham became rich in Egypt (12:16, 13:2/5), even though he didn't have enough to pay his bills when he came to Egypt (see Rashi on 13:3), so unless Avraham became a better businessman in Egypt than he had been in Canaan (12:16 strongly indicates that he became rich because of the gifts given to him, see Gur Aryeh on 12:13, but Maharil Diskin explains it as being able to operate under more business-friendly conditions than others), or G-d decided to start fulfilling His blessing to Avraham in Egypt (see Rashi on 12:2, but see Maskil L'Dovid below), it would seem that the gifts he received in Egypt could not be considered "small," and were more than just room and board.

His second answer might offend some, so I won't repeat it here. The only comment I'll make is that it would be difficult to differentiate between what was said before they were in Egypt and what actually happened since Avraham did allow them to give him gifts (see 12:16). His third answer is that Avraham only accepted gifts in Egypt because he was poor and needed to pay his bills (referencing Rashi on 13:3), whereas he was already rich when he refused to accept the king of Sodom's offer. Although Avraham saying he didn't want the king of Sodom to say that he was the one who made him rich might indicate that he must not have been rich, we don't know if Avraham's stated concern was real or only intended for the king of Sodom (see Daas Sofrim), if Avraham was concerned that the king of Sodom might say it even if it wasn't true, or if the years between Avraham and Lot separating and the war with the kings had impacted either Avraham's wealth or his perception of what was considered wealthy. In any case, Avraham certainly had more when he refused to keep the spoils of war than when he accepted Pharaoh's gifts.

Maharal (Gur Aryeh) offers a couple of explanations as well. First (on 12:13) he differentiates

between the king of Sodom compensating Avraham for saving him, which would not constitute Avraham becoming rich through G-d's blessing (see Rashi on 12:2 and 14:23), whereas Pharaoh giving him gifts in order to honor him would. Then (also on 12:13) he says that Avraham might have refused to accept Pharaoh's gifts too if not for the circumstances, namely needing to gain the respect of the Egyptian populace (so that they wouldn't try to harm him), which was accomplished when they saw the nobility giving him presents. Taz suggests that Avraham had to ask for gifts in Egypt, and had to do so through Sara, as otherwise there was no way to guarantee that she could tell everyone she was his sister without raising suspicion. If she wasn't asked who he was, and instead voluntarily said "he's my brother," they would wonder why she was telling them that, and realize that they must really be married. Therefore, he had her ask people to help her poor brother (with the information that he is her brother being secondary), to which Pharaoh obliged. Otherwise, though, Avraham wouldn't have accepted anything from Pharaoh either.

Later (on 14:23), Maharal elaborates on his first answer, differentiating between the king of Sodom making his offer to Avraham under distressful circumstances (Sodom being defeated and losing its possessions), which wouldn't qualify as coming as part of G-d's blessing, and Pharaoh's gifts. He adds that giving Avraham gifts after being stricken by G-d for having taken Sara doesn't qualify as "distress," since the gifts were given as part of his atonement. Aside from trying to understand this difference, Avraham was given the gifts before Pharaoh was stricken, so shouldn't have any "distress" attached. [This last issue also applies to Yad Malachi's suggestion that Avraham wasn't concerned that Pharaoh (or Avimelech) would say they made him rich, as they saw G-d defend Avraham (and Sara) when they were stricken, whereas the king of Sodom might not have realized that G-d was behind Avraham's amazing military victory; since Avraham accepted the gifts before Pharaoh was stricken, this couldn't be why he wasn't concerned about Pharaoh attributing Avraham's wealth to himself.]

B'er HaTorah (on 14:23; on 12:13 he quotes, and dismisses, an answer that is quoted by Sha'aray Aharon from a more recent source) explains Maharal's distinction between distressful situations to mean that even though it was distressful for Pharaoh, his suffering brought honor to Avraham (and Sara), so qualified as a vehicle for G-d's blessing. (Sodom's suffering occurred independently of Avraham's miraculous victory over the kings who had ransacked Sodom.) He then suggests his own answer, based on the inhabitants of Sodom being very miserly (a description backed by their unwillingness to share their bounty with others), a trait that stems from not believing that ultimately everything comes from G-d. Avraham knew that they wouldn't

attribute these possessions becoming his as coming from G-d, but would always consider his wealth as really being theirs, so didn't want to keep it (see 14:22, where Avraham made a point of mentioning that everything comes from G-d.) This concern did not apply to Pharaoh, so there was no issue with keeping his gifts.

B'er Basadeh (on 12:13) also makes a few suggestions, the first of which he subsequently found in kabbalistic sources, that the "gifts" Avraham wanted were the "unclean names" that would help him distinguish between holiness and "black magic" (see pg. 7 of <http://tinyurl.com/o6afe22>), a gift he passed on to his children (see Rashi on 25:6). However, as previously mentioned (based on 12:16), these gifts seem to be "sheep, cattle, donkeys, servants and camels," unless he obtained these things by invoking the help of the demons whose names he had just learned (see the "diyuk" made by Ha'k'sav V'ha'kaballah on 12:16). B'er Basadeh's second answer is based on the concept that what happened to our forefathers impacts what will happen to their descendants; even though Avraham would have normally refused to accept Pharaoh's gifts, he wanted to set the stage for us leaving Egypt with great riches. (Even though he wasn't told yet that we would be "strangers in another land for 400 years," somehow Avraham knew, prophetically, that something like that would happen, and that the "other land" would be Egypt, and he wanted us to become rich there.) [I'm not sure why he didn't also want to set a precedent of becoming rich from the spoils of war.]

On 14:23, B'er Basadeh says that the reason Avraham didn't want to keep the spoils of war was so that no one would think that the reason he risked his life (and the lives of those with him) by attacking the four kings was to recover the spoils for himself, rather than to save the life of his nephew (and the others who were taken captive). Da'as Sofrom suggests that the thought of gaining financially from war, which is ugly and messy by its very nature, was too distasteful for Avraham.

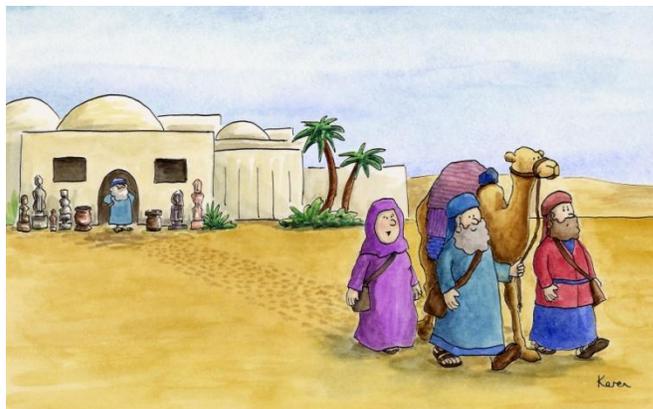
Maskil L'Dovid (on 12:13) says that Avraham wanted to become rich from G-d, not from people, but G-d's promise only applied in the Holy Land. Therefore, when in Egypt, where there was no other option (because G-d hadn't promised to bless him there), he accepted Pharaoh's gifts, but when in Israel, where he was confident that G-d's blessing would be fulfilled, he turned down the king of Sodom's offer. Nevertheless (as others point out), unless there was a reason why G-d's blessing couldn't be fulfilled through the property that had originally belonged to Sodom (and their sinful ways may be enough of a reason), how could Avraham know that miraculously winning this war wasn't the vehicle through which G-d was fulfilling His promise?

Netziv (on 14:23) suggests Avraham knew that Pharaoh (and Avimelech) felt honored that Avraham

accepted their gifts, but the king of Sodom wouldn't, but would feel that he was doing Avraham the favor. He adds that Avraham didn't want to honor the king of Sodom by taking his gift, but (a) it really belonged to Avraham, so wouldn't have been a gift, and (b) even if it were, the king of Sodom wouldn't have felt honored by Avraham accepting it.

In 5762, I pointed out that shortly after Avraham left Egypt, laden with Pharaoh's gifts (see 13:2), this sudden newfound wealth had led to the fight between Avraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds, which caused their separation, including Lot separating himself from Avraham's G-d (see Rashi on 13:11). I then suggested that this experience led Avraham to reconsider accepting things from others. [The original question is built on the assumption that Avraham had already reached his highest level by the time he moved to Canaan, but this is a fallacy. Hopefully we are all growing each and every day, and if Avraham was continually growing, he was not the same at 75 as he was when he was 85, or 99, etc. The fact that Avraham did something differently when he was older and more experienced should not be a surprise.]

Another possibility is based on B'reishis Rabbah (51:6), which explains how Lot could have been described (19:29) as living in all the cities of the Sodom region (and not just in Sodom); either he owned so much that he had storehouses in all of them, or he lent money to all with interest (so had a hand in the business dealings of all the cities). If so, when their possessions were taken, much of it really belonged to Lot. This is especially true if the whole purpose of the attack was to capture Lot and his possessions in order to draw Avraham into a battle and kill him (see Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 27), as Lot's things were a primary target, and therefore constituted a large percentage of what the king of Sodom was offering Avraham. Even if Avraham would have taken gifts from others, how could he agree to keep what had been taken from his nephew Lot? © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer



"Hashem said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" (Genesis 12:1)