

## Lech Lecha, Rabbi James Proops

As we study and investigate the events of Avraham Avinu's life, it becomes clear that he is a man with incredible powers of perception and insight. The clearest example of this, is the well known medrash of how he came to acknowledge the existence of God through his reflective analysis of the world and the surrounding universe. However, beyond his theological deductions, he also possessed a deep understanding and awareness of human nature.

Following their departure from Egypt we learn that Avraham and Lot were independently very successful, owning many flocks, herds and tents. It was not too long before tension arose and “וַיְהִי־רִיב־בֵּין־רְעֵי־מִקְנֵה־אַבְרָם־וּבֵין־רְעֵי־מִקְנֵה־לוֹט - there was a quarrel between the shepherds of Avram's cattle and the shepherds of Lot's cattle”. Rashi explains that Lot's shepherds would allow their animals to pasture in the fields belonging to others and the shepherds of Avraham reproached them for stealing. This caused Avraham distress and he approached Lot requesting “אַל־נָא־תְהִי־מְרִיבָה־בֵּינִי־וּבֵינֶיךָ־וּבֵין־רְעֵי־וּבֵין־רְעֵיךָ־כִּי־אֲנָשִׁים־אֶחָדִים־אָנָּחְנוּ - please let there be no quarrel between me and you and between my shepherds and your shepherds, because we are kinsmen”. The simple understanding of Avraham's statement is that he did not want fights and bad feelings between the two camps because they were family.

In the commentary of Rabbeinu Yosef Bekhor Shor, we find a fascinating subtext to Avraham's statement. He was really saying to Lot, “This is a disgrace! Others will say, ‘These two are family and they don't want to get along with one another. They only quarrel! If that's how they treat family, how will they treat others? They are evil’.” According to the Bekhor Shor Avraham was concerned with the image that would be projected to outsiders by their infighting as well as the *Chillul Hashem* that would ensue. However, this explanation of Avraham's actions is difficult to understand. Surely anyone who heard about their fighting would know the basis of the argument was that Lot's employees were stealing, compared with Avraham who ensured his animals were muzzled to prevent them grazing on other people's property? Would this not therefore be seen as a case of *Kiddush Hashem*, as Avraham who preached about God was meticulous in his respect for the

property of others? Furthermore, Avraham was famous for his open home welcoming any travellers who might pass by and taking care of their every need. He was known to be a holy man whose life was dedicated to acts of kindness to others. Would anyone who heard of the quarrel between Avraham and Lot really conclude that he was evil and no good?

The answer offered by Rav Yaakov Galinsky is that Avraham was demonstrating his profound understanding of human nature. People will seize on the one bad point and remember the one negative account and ignore all else. All too often we will discount someone's positive traits and qualities in the face of a misjudged moment or mistake. Sometimes, as with Avraham, the problem is not even of their doing, yet they are joined together and judged with others to the great detriment of their reputation. This grasp of man's tendency to hold on to the negatives, was of great concern to Avraham. He sought to influence mankind to recognize and serve Hakadosh Baruch Hu, yet with even a slight reputation for fighting with his own family he would never be successful. People would soon ignore all the good that he had achieved in the face of a scandal.

It seems that this tendency is now more prolific than ever before. While exposure of one's damaging behavior is crucial for a functioning society that is built on transparency, it is clear that some cases are overplayed and used as an excuse to overlook and ignore any positive contributions to society that a person has made. Sometimes we become so transfixed by the negative that we ignore all the positives around us. This has been most clear in the build up to the coming Presidential Election. Overwhelmingly I have heard from both sides about the negative impact, the mistakes, the misdeeds and the frailties of character of the opposition candidate. I have heard very little, from either side, about the positive influence and impact of their own candidate, yet I'm sure a case could be made for both. It seems that more than ever we are completely absorbed and distracted by the bad, rather than looking for and focussing on the good.

From Avraham's great perception we can learn two invaluable lessons. Firstly we must not fall prey to the tendency to allow our negative impressions overshadow our search for the positive, in any situation. Secondly, we must all do our utmost to avoid becoming embroiled in situations which will reflect badly on, not only us as

individuals, but the Jewish People as a whole. Avraham recognized that with the great potential he possessed for promoting Kiddush Hashem, he had to ensure that he stayed far away from even the possibility of Chillul Hashem. May we all follow his example and not provide any distractions from the good we do in this world.

Shabbat Shalom