

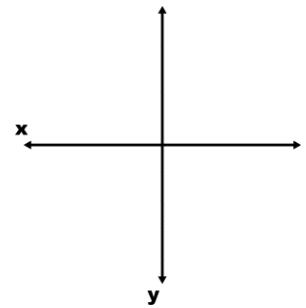


The Parsha in Practice

Geometrical Acceptance

Should I choose right or left? This might be a question that we face next week in the voting booth, but was a question previously faced by Lot in this week's parsha.

Lot had been accompanying Avraham's family and both had achieved great financial success. The pasuk describes how the shepherds that managed their substantial flocks could not get along due to the limited amount grazing land available and they clashed.



And so Avram says to Lot

אל־נָא תְהִי מְרִיבָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ וּבֵין רַעֲי וּבֵין רַעֲיָךְ כִּי־אֲנָשִׁים אַחִים אָנַחְנוּ: הֲלֹא כָל־הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵיךָ הַפְּרָד גָּא מֵעַלְי אִם־הַשְּׂמָאל וְאִימְנָה וְאִם־הַיְמִין וְאִשְׁמְאִילָה:

"Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate: if you go left, I will go right; and if you go right, I will go left."

Between the "right" and the "left," Lot would fatefully choose to go towards the evil city of Sodom for its lush pasture and so, וַיִּפְרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו, they parted from each other.

Following their separation, G-d instructs Avram to raise his eyes, and to look to the north, south, east, and west, towards the land that He would someday give to Avraham's descendants. A verse later, Avram is told to קוּם הִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּאֶרֶץ לְאָרְצָה וּלְרֹחְבָהּ, "rise up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth" for G-d would be giving him this land, in its entirety.

A close reading of these few pesukim shows three different ways to describe the expanse of the land: there's "right or left," as the decision is put before Lot, and then there's "north south east, and west" and "length and breadth" used by G-d to describe the land that Avraham's children would ultimately inherit. Why these different expressions to describe the same thing?

I'd like to suggest an explanation that returns us back to why they separated in the first place. Simply, this was a dispute about space. There was not enough pasture for the two of them. Rashi quotes the idea that their separation was about values as well. Lot and his shepherds had chosen a different ethical path and Avraham felt they needed to part ways. Either one of those understandings has Avraham in the right.

There is another approach. R' Yehuda, quoted in the Yalkut Shimoni collection of Midrashim, is critical of Avraham's separation from his nephew, for whatever its reason. He says:

אמר הקב"ה לכל הוא מדבק וללוט בן אחיו אינו מדבק

G-d said, you connect to all people, but to Lot, your nephew, you don't attach yourself?

R' Yehuda seems troubled by the fact that even if we do believe that there wasn't enough space, or that Lot was trouble, Avraham, the pioneering outreach professional who had spent his life recruiting pagans to his tent of faith should have found a way to include Lot as well. How could he have allowed Lot to become ensnared by the tentacles of Sodom?

In shul on Sukkot, I spoke about the extremely broad ways that we define a Sukkah. A minimal amount of walls are required and those walls themselves need a minimal amount of substance to be classified as walls. We quoted R' Kook that this is because the Sukkah is the symbol of sharing, of inclusiveness, and of peace. In order for all to inhabit the "Sukkah of Peace," we need to be willing to provide a bit of flexibility in how we define our walls and in how wide we open our tent to others.

I wonder if - to R' Yehuda - Avraham is being taught this same lesson here. When he is dealing with Lot, he sees only two ways: "right" or "left." It's my way or the highway. Perhaps he is legitimately worried about Lot's character and what will happen if he stays and the fights that might continue or worsen between their shepherds (and between themselves?), but he only offers a bi-directional solution. There is right and left. Choose!

As soon as Lot chooses, G-d reminds Avraham that there are more directions to choose from! There are the four cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west and there's the entirety of the land! There's the width, there's the length, there is SO much space that they can inhabit together.

Imagine the difference between a line, and a graph. When we only can go in two directions, when we are in disagreement, we have no choice but to distance ourselves further and further apart. Battles are binary, and one-dimensional thinking reigns. If instead we allow for a multi-directional placement, as on a XY graph, we will find that the dots on the graph don't need to be significantly further from each other but can be placed in infinite other spots on the plane.

These days, the world seems to have only two directions, only two poles. That's the "polarization" that so many decry, the "right" or "left" that we must choose between. We are so quick to disqualify others for not entirely agreeing with our complete intellectual positions and we are often not appreciative enough of the areas in which we agree. I do not recall an election that has taken on this level of rhetoric in the extreme posturing of of "us vs. them" (whoever you define as either). This is scary enough that Walmart is removing guns and ammunition from its displays this coming Tuesday. Hopefully, they will still carry graphing paper.

As with all fights, debates, and disputes that occur, we can choose to allow those divisions to bring us further apart, as if plotted on a line, or hopefully, as I believe Avraham is being reminded, we can choose to allow for lateral movement, for two-dimensional thinking, **and for finding a space for others that might be different that is not as distant.** And with that..

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach