בס״ד

# Divrei HaRav

*Parshas Lech Lecha 5787*

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Divrei Torah from Friday night, Shabbos day, and Shalosh Seudos
Prepared from a listener’s recollection

# Friday Night

## Beyond דמשק אליעזר: Disciples Who Make the Torah Their Own

Hashem appears to Avraham Avinu with a sweeping promise: “אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד”, “Fear not, Avram; I am a shield for you; your reward is exceedingly great” (בראשית טו, א). Avraham’s reply is startling. Rather than rejoice, he asks what any of it is worth: “ה׳ אלקים מה תתן לי ואנכי הולך ערירי ובן משק ביתי הוא דמשק אליעזר”, “Hashem Elokim, what can You give me, seeing that I go childless, and the steward of my house is Dameshek Eliezer?” (בראשית טו, ב). Reward and blessing mean little to a man who has no one to carry his life’s work forward.

On the simple level, “Dameshek” tells us that Eliezer came from Damascus. Rashi, however, cites the Talmud’s reading of the word as an acronym: “דולה ומשקה מתורת רבו לאחרים”, “he draws from his master’s Torah and gives others to drink of it.” Eliezer was far more than a household steward. He was the disciple who drank deeply of Avraham’s teaching and passed it on faithfully to others.

This raises a difficulty, posed by the מאור ושמש and other מפרשים. Avraham seems to answer his own question in the very verse in which he asks it. He laments that no one will continue his legacy, and in the same breath he names Eliezer, the devoted disciple who already spreads his master’s Torah. The heir to everything Avraham built stands right before him. What, then, is he missing?

The מאור ושמש answers that Avraham Avinu was not seeking to reproduce himself. To see why, we need only recall who Avraham was. He is called “אברם העברי” (בראשית יד, יג), for the whole world stood on one side and he stood on the other. When all of mankind was steeped in עבודה זרה, Avraham alone stopped and asked whether any of it made sense, and concluded that something entirely different must be true. No teacher handed him that truth. He reached it through his own thinking and forged his own path to Hashem.

A man like that does not dream of a disciple who repeats his words verbatim. This was Avraham’s plea before Hashem: It is a blessing to have a student who can transmit my Torah faithfully, word for word. But that is not the legacy I wish to build. I want to raise people who can learn Torah of their own.

This does not mean that each person invents his own Torah. We all stand on one foundation: the same חמשה חומשי תורה, the same הלכות, the same תנ״ך, the same Hashem. The question is how that Torah speaks to each individual: how it fits him, and how it applies to his life. Every person has his own way of bringing the Torah into his עבודה. There is no license to use it wrongly, but there are many ways to use it rightly.

Here lies the difference between Eliezer and the legacy Avraham sought. Eliezer was the faithful copy, reproducing exactly what he had received. One can build a yeshiva full of copies, or one can build a yeshiva of people who each have a Torah of their own. To be the one who transmits another’s Torah best is no flaw; it is a genuine talent and a real gift for explanation. But it is not the goal. The goal is to give of yourself, to give over your own Torah.

The Rav added that this is exactly what Avraham was granted. The little the Torah tells us about Yitzchak Avinu portrays him as Avraham’s opposite. Avraham embodied חסד,

an overflowing kindness that went out into the world to draw people close. Yitzchak stayed where he was. He was קדוש, an עולה תמימה who never left ארץ ישראל, and his attribute was גבורה. Avraham had not davened for a son who would mirror him. He davened for someone different, who would take the very Torah his father transmitted and make it his own.

Dovid HaMelech captures this idea in the opening chapter of Tehillim: "כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה יומם ולילה", "but his desire is in the Torah of Hashem, and in his Torah he meditates day and night" (תהלים א, ב). The verse begins with "the Torah of Hashem" and ends with "his Torah." In Rashi's words, "בתחלה היא נקראת תורת ה', ומשעמל בה היא נקראת תורתו", at first it is called the Torah of Hashem, and once a person has toiled in it, it is called his Torah. When one labors in Hashem's Torah, applies it to his life, and weaves it into his עבודת ה', it becomes truly his.

That is the legacy Avraham Avinu longed for: not disciples who merely echo their master, but disciples rooted in the very same Torah of Hashem, who toil in it until it becomes their own.

# Shabbos Day

## Rescuing Lot: Responsibility Before the Big Picture

Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu built something extraordinary. Whatever form it took in their day, whether yeshivos, buildings, or an entire operation, it was a vast enterprise devoted to a single ideal: that all of mankind should come to recognize הקב"ה.

Then a fugitive arrives with news: "ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברם העברי... וישמע אברם כי נשבה אחיו, וירק את חניכיו ילידי ביתו שמנה עשר ושלש מאות, וירדף עד דן", "The fugitive came and told Avram the Ivri… And Avram heard that his brother had been taken captive, and he armed his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them as far as Dan" (בראשית יד, יג–יד). Lot has been captured, and Avraham's response is immediate. Everything stops. The enterprise is shut down, and Avraham sets out to bring him back.

The Rav emphasized this point more than once: we have no idea how long the great work stood still. We do not know how many people were not brought close to Hashem in that time, or how many stopped learning. All of it was set aside for one man.

And who was that man? Lot was, in a sense, Avraham's greatest disappointment. He was his nephew and his brother-in-law, and more than that, his תלמיד מובהק. Avraham raised him and taught him everything he knew. Lot belonged to the inner circle: he sat at Avraham's table, heard his teaching, and took part in the entire mission. Then he walked away from it all to settle among the people of Sedom. Yet the Torah calls him simply "אחיו", his brother, and for his brother Avraham stopped everything.

Here Avraham Avinu teaches us a remarkable מידה. A person may be engaged in great and important work, and that is wonderful. But no undertaking, however lofty, may cause him to lose sight of the everyday responsibilities he carries: his אחריות to his family, his colleagues, his friends, and everyone within his circle of responsibility. Pursuing a larger goal never excuses being derelict in that duty.

And see what came of it. From Lot descended Moav and Amon. From Moav came Rus, mother of the royal house of Dovid, and from Amon came Naamah, mother of Rechavam ben Shlomo; from them will come Mashiach. Avraham set the big picture aside to meet his responsibility, and that very act will bring about the biggest picture of all, the ultimate one.

The lesson is not that the great mission must be abandoned in favor of responsibility. It is that when a person attends to his responsibilities, even at what appears to be the expense of the big picture, he may be building an even bigger one. So it is in our own homes. When we take our responsibility to our family seriously, we discover that our family is the bigger picture. Our life is the bigger picture.

The Rav shared a joke, though a painful one. A rebbi asked the boys in his class what they wished they could be. One boy answered that he wished he were an orphan. Startled, the rebbi asked him why. "Because then," the boy said, "maybe my father would buy me a bike." His father was busy buying bikes for orphans. That is a beautiful thing; the great projects, the drive, and the חסד are all wonderful. But they may never come at the expense of the responsibility closest to home.

What has carried כלל ישראל through its history, and what will carry it forward, is knowing where our responsibility lies. At times we will have to stop, take care of what is ours to take care of, and then rebuild. That is what Avraham Avinu did. He closed the entire operation because he had an אחריות to Lot, brought him home, and then resumed the work. And from that rescue came Mashiach.

## Shalosh Seudos

### "והיה ברכה": When the Drive Outweighs the Fear

Together with the command of "לך לך" came a promise: "ואעשך לגוי גדול ואברכך ואגדלה שמך והיה ברכה", "I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (בראשית יב, ב). Rashi explains "ואברכך" as a blessing of wealth, and "ואגדלה שמך" speaks of renown. Hashem was promising Avraham riches and fame.

What are we to make of this? Hashem offers wealth and fame, and Avraham, as it were, signs up. Was it the promise of riches and renown that persuaded Avraham Avinu to set out?

Certainly not. Avraham was a great idealist. His vision was to travel the world, change the way people thought, and turn them from עבודה זרה to the recognition of הקב"ה. He understood that such a mission would require vast resources. Fame, too, is a powerful tool for someone who journeys from place to place to draw people close, because renown brings credibility. People know who you are, and you need not start from nothing wherever you go.

The promise did not create Avraham's commitment; he was already wholly devoted to his ideals. What Hashem's blessing of wealth and renown gave him were the means to pursue them.

The verse closes with the words "והיה ברכה", "and you shall be a blessing." The מפרשים explain these words in various ways. Rashi writes that the power of blessing is now placed in Avraham's hands, and that the first ברכה of שמונה עשרה concludes with his name alone; on the next verse he adds that a father will bless his son, "תהא כאברהם", "May you be like Avraham" (רש"י בראשית יב, ב–ג).

The Rav, however, read "והיה ברכה" as a charge. I am giving you wealth; I am giving you renown. Now go and do something with it. Do good with it. Build the yeshiva; build the enterprise you long to build. Be a blessing.

This charge, the Rav said, is addressed to each of us. One person has a voice; another has a sense of humor. He can keep it to himself and amuse a few friends, or he can use it to make people better and happier and to draw more people in. Every person has received some כחות from הקב"ה, his own personal "wealth": personality, warmth, friendliness. "והיה ברכה": be rich in that way, and be a blessing with it.

"והיה ברכה" also means leaving every place better than you found it. Wherever I go, I should infuse that place with the "wealth" I was given as a blessing, so that it is better when I leave than when I arrived. Leave your כחות there.

The Rav brought this to life with a story told of the Stefanester Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Matisyahu Friedman of Stefanesti. Even the gentiles wanted him to walk through their fields, for they knew that wherever he passed, he brought ברכה. A Yid brings ברכה; a צדיק brings ברכה; and each of us, too, is meant to bring ברכה to every place we go.

But did Avraham Avinu truly want money and fame? He did not. What carried him was a principle the Rav developed at length: when a person's drive is greater than his anxiety, the obstacles fall away.

The מסילת ישרים (פרק ט) cites the verse "אמר עצל שחל בדרך ארי בין הרחבות", "The lazy man says, there is a lion on the road, a lion in the streets" (משלי כו, יג), together with Chazal's explanation (דברים רבה ח). The עצל is told, "הרי רבך בעיר, לך ולמד תורה ממנו", "Your rebbi is in town; go and learn Torah from him." As the Rav told it, he first answers that he would gladly go, but he is very tired, and he lies down to sleep. When he wakes and is urged again, he has a new reason: he has heard there is a lion loose in the streets. The מסילת ישרים concludes: "הא למדת, שאין היראה גורמת שיתעצל אלא עצלה גורמת לו שיתירא", "You learn from this that it is not the fear that makes him lazy; it is the laziness that makes him afraid."

The Rav explained that עצלות here is not laziness in the ordinary sense. It means being held back: stopping short, withdrawing. The man is not kept home by the lion or by his fatigue. He stays home because his drive is not great enough to overcome them.

The Rav offered examples. He admitted that he himself does not enjoy public speaking. Yet when a person cares deeply enough about his message, when it is something he feels truly matters, the anxiety simply falls away. People sometimes ask, "Would you oversleep for your flight to Florida?" In truth, the Rav said, there is no comparison. For my flight to Florida I have a drive, so I overcome every obstacle. Where there is no drive, no obstacle will be overcome. The answer is to build the drive.

This is what Avraham Avinu did. He had no need for money or fame, and they bring worries of their own: the very things we would fear, such as wondering how many of our friends are friends only because of our wealth. But his drive to spread the name of הקב"ה throughout the world was strong enough that such concerns carried no weight against it. When a person's drive and ideals are strong enough, every anxiety falls away; none of them matters as much as the drive.

This is the message of "והיה ברכה", to Avraham and to us. Be a blessing. Bring something more to the table; add something of your own; leave every place better than you found it. Hashem says, as it were: I am giving you these gifts. Perhaps you do not want them, but you are building something great, and that is the drive. Make your drive big enough, and all the anxieties, all the reasons not to do it, will fall away.

## Editorial note

These teachings were prepared from a listener's recollection and are presented in edited form, not as a verbatim transcript. Source references in parentheses were added in preparation.