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not economic, but rather religious and ethical. Lot and Avram's farmhands, seasoned underlings who have experienced firsthand Avram's delivery by God from Pharaoh's court, have very different approaches to God's promise to grant the Land of Canaan to their master. Lot's herders, very much like Lot himself later in the parashah, display a firm faith in God's promise, albeit myopic and grounded in selfish motivations: since God has promised the land to Avram, therefore they have DIVINE RIGHT to act upon this promise here and now. Avram's shepherds, on the other hand, exhibit a more pragmatic approach, but also one that takes into account the ethical values and the property of the current inhabitants of the land: despite God's promises, these do not override their present ethical obligations.

In the history of world religions, we find that Lot's herders have had plenty of students and imitators. We cannot count the examples of how, based on divine promises (real or fabricated) or prophecies (often conveniently interpreted), people have found justification for the suspension of their moral obligations, disguising them as faith and obedience. Alas! As with Lot's herders, this veneer of faith often thinly veils personal or national self-interest.

The path of Avram's herdsmen is harder and historically rarer. They would rather set aside God's promises for a moment, even when it goes against their own gain and comfort, to address the difficult moral needs of the present time. This might seem, at first glance, as lack of faith. But as Avram will remind God's self in a couple of chapters: the God of Israel is not a merchant whose promises override God's nature, but rather God is, in essence, the God of Justice. Either God's promises will be fulfilled justly or these promises will be discovered, in time, to be indeed not Godly.

God fulfills God's promises in circuitous and strange ways which are beyond our intellectual grasp or our limited lifespans. Placing law and right before them (even in direct opposition to them) is not faithless. Indeed, it is a brave affirmation that God can deliver on God's pledges in a way that is not deficient or tainted, but rather perfect, or as we say in Hebrew: *Emunah Sheleimah*.

**More Torah, mostly in Spanish, from Rabbi Juan Mejia, can be found on his website: [www.koltuvsefarad.com](http://www.koltuvsefarad.com).**

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## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Lekh Lekha

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Annual | Genesis 12:1-17:27 (Etz Hayim p. 69-93; Hertz p. 45-60)

Triennial Genesis 12:1-13:18 (Etz Hayim p. 77-85; Hertz p. 50-56)

Haftarah | Isaiah 40:27-41:16 (Etz Hayim p. 94-98; Hertz p. 60-62)

## D'var Torah: Faithful Shepherds

**Rabbi Juan Mejia**, *Conservative Yeshiva Alum ('02-'04) & Education Director of Emanuel Synagogue in Oklahoma City, OK*

In a common trope in the book of Bereshit of brothers going separate ways, our parashah depicts the household and flocks of Avram (Avraham before his name change) and Lot parting company. Lot settles in Kikar Hayarden, the fertile Jordan Valley rift around the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah before their destruction, while Avram chooses the rough hill country of Judah. The trigger for this division of Avram's camp is described as a **"quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle."** (Bereshit 13:7) The previous verses describe the vastness of the combined flocks of Avram and Lot, so the simple reading of the text hints to the reasons for this quarrel being economic and even environmental. When nomadic herders amass too many animals, they run the risk of depleting an area of its resources, and the smart course of action is to divide the flocks into more manageable and sustainable portions. This explanation is espoused by Ramban and Seforno.

Rashi, based on Bereshit Rabba (41:5), has a very different take on the underlying cause for this strife. **"AND THERE WAS A QUARREL because Lot's shepherds were wicked men and grazed their cattle in other people's fields. Avram's shepherds rebuked them for this act of robbery, but they replied, 'The land has been given to Avram, and since he has no son as heir, Lot will be his heir: consequently this is not robbery.' Scripture, however, states: 'The Canaanite and the Perizzite abode then in the land,' so that Avram was not yet entitled to possession."** According to Rashi the root of the fight between the herders was

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## D'var Haftarah: The Path Forward

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

According to the prophet, God cannot fathom the people's sense that He ignores both their good deeds and their plight: "Why should you say, O Yaakov, and speak O Israel: **'My way is hidden from the Lord,** my cause is ignored by God?'" (40:27) Of course, from a human perspective, the response of the children of Israel should not be surprising. The audience to this prophecy has been through a lot. They have suffered exile from their homes, yet have remained loyal to God. They yearned for return from exile with an expectation that God would make it happen. Still, that hope had yet to come to fruition.

Their reaction is not unlike any of us who have suffered hard times and have a sense of existential abandonment. The feeling of being ignored is hard to shake and faith seems like a hard sell. This verse and the following midrash see this response as totally unjustified: "Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] says: 'The Holy One Blessed be He said: They are complainers, the children of complainers! Adam, the first person, for example. I busied myself with finding Him a mate. (See Bereshit 2:18) And once I found her, he complains: 'The woman that you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree.' (Bereshit 3:12) Yaakov, the same thing. I worked to make his son king over Egypt – 'And Joseph was governor over the land.' (Bereshit 42:6) And still, he complained: **'My way is hidden from the Lord'** The same goes for Yaakov's children in the desert. I (God) busied myself with finding them light food (manna) to eat like that of the angels and still they complained. The same with Zion. I busy Myself with doing away with their enemies. Have I not dealt with Babylon, Media (Persia), and Greece, even as I will deal with the current wicked kingdom (Rome)? Still, they complain..." (adapted from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 17:3 Mandelbaum ed. pp. 284-5)

What we see in this midrash is that life will never be absolutely perfect. There is always room to complain, and human beings take full advantage of that fact. Still, how we live our lives is a matter of perspective. One can fixate on the cup that is half empty or be thankful for the cup that is half full. The life of faith is one of optimism, informed by a relationship with God. It is the only path for those who choose to move forward.

## Parashah Study: Silence is Golden

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

Text is comprised of words, spoken and narrated. But between the words there are meaningful silences. What do we hear when we listen to them?

### TEXT - Bereshit 15:1-3

**(1)** *After these incidents, the word of the Lord came to Avram in a vision, saying: "Fear not Avram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."* **(2)** *Avram said: "O Lord God, what will you give me, while I am going childless and the one in charge of my house is Dammesek Eliezer."* **(3)** *Avram said: "since you have not granted me offspring, my steward will be my heir."*

- Why did Avram feel fear? Why do you think that Avram does not seem to turn to God in his crisis?
- Verses 2-3 seem to be written in poor style, yet nothing in the tightly woven text of Torah is without reason. What could you get rid of, and why do you think that it was nonetheless written this way?

### COMMENTARY - Rashi on Bereshit 15:1

**After these incidents:** *...After this miracle had been wrought for him, that he slew the kings, he was worried and said, "Perhaps I have received reward for all my righteous deeds." Therefore, the Omnipresent said to him, "Fear not Avram, I am a shield to you" from punishment, that you will not be punished for all those souls that you have slain, and as far as your being worried about receiving reward, your reward is exceedingly great.*

- Rashi connects the verses to events told in the previous chapter: Avram goes to battle to rescue his nephew Lot who has been taken captive along with the rest of Sodom's residents. What does Rashi think that Avram is concerned about?
- How might we describe Avram's state of mind in modern terms?
- Extra challenge: How does Avram's fear, as Rashi describes it, relate to verses 2-3 in the text?

### COMMENTARY - Hizkuni on Bereshit 15:3

**Avram said...Avram said:** *Since he paused in the meanwhile, it went back and said "Avram said..."*

- What is the reason for the introduction of Avram in both verse 2 and verse 3?
- Why do you think that there was a pause between verse 2 and verse 3?
- Avram levels a heavy claim against God who promised him that his offspring shall inherit the land. What is God doing after verse 2? Why is no response recorded in the text?
- What is the value of a pause— of silence and quiet time— in a conversation?