

The Dispute in the Frankfurt Jewish Community

Category: Bereishis, Lech Lecha

Should Jews separate from those less observant? What lesson can we learn from Avraham and Lot? A deeper look into the parsha.

To Separate or not to Separate?

Good Shabbos!

This week, let's take a bit of a trip back in European Jewish history.

In the 1700s, the Jews of Germany, as well as those of other European countries, belonged to one official Jewish community organization that had legal standing under the auspices of the government itself. In other words, by German law, every German Jewish citizen had to pay the German Jewish community tax—and in turn, the organized Jewish community would provide members with all religious services, from synagogues to cemeteries. The Jewish community controlled everything.

However, in the 1800s, the early Reform movement in Germany progressively gained power, with an increasing number of rabbis and community presidents being Reform members. These individuals led their communities as they wished.

Now, the majority of Jews in those communities were not mitzvah-observant. However, the Orthodox minority in every such community “did not exactly love,” to put it diplomatically, the fact that their government-sanctioned Jewish community taxes were being spent to fund synagogues that opposed Jewish tradition.

And so in Frankfurt, there rose a young Orthodox rabbi by the name of Samson Raphael Hirsch. Along with other Orthodox rabbis, he walked the corridors of government power, influencing the powers that be to allow them to set up an independent new German Jewish community body that would operate exclusively by the rules of Halachah. After several years of lengthy political squabbling, a law

was passed in 1876 that allowed German Jewish citizens to secede from the official Jewish community recognized by the government.

As soon as that happened, Rabbi Hirsch immediately established Kehal Adath Jeshurun, which exists to this day. He invited all Orthodox Jews to join the new community, and many indeed did so.

Additionally, Rabbi Hirsch banned membership in the old general Jewish community, also requiring members of the new community to cease and desist paying the long-standing community tax. But in actuality, the majority of the members of the new community did not accept Rabbi Hirsch's requirement and remained members of the old community, too.

The primary reason for doing so, they argued, was the Jewish cemetery situation. You see, anyone who had now left the old Jewish community body would not be able to be buried in the old Jewish cemeteries that belonged to the old Jewish community—and thus, the long-standing old German Jewish families, whose families had lived in Germany for centuries and had been part of the official Jewish community well before it became “Reformified,” were not prepared to consider not having their final resting place alongside their ancestors of yore.

And so, as is the case with every Jewish communal matter, the debate over whether the Orthodox community of Frankfurt should or should not completely secede from the existing general community progressively heated up. As a result, many Orthodox Jews approached the rabbi of Würzburg, Rabbi Seligman Baer (Yitzchak Dov) Bamberger (who was described by the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe in Sefer HaSichos 5703, pg. 66 as “great in fear of Heaven and great in Torah”) to arbitrate the dispute.

Now, Rabbi Bamberger was known as one of the supporters of setting up independent communities; thus, everyone was sure that he'd take the side of Rabbi Hirsch. But after meeting with the heads of the general community in Frankfurt, he was convinced that in this particular situation, there was no reason to secede from the general community. The Frankfurt leaders assured him that no Orthodox Jewish community taxes would fund any Reform synagogue or activity; on the contrary, the general Jewish community would be the one funding all the Orthodox Jewish community's needs. Rabbi Bamberger ruled that there was no obligation for the Frankfurt community to secede from the general

community—he argued that it was precisely when the Orthodox would remain part of the general community that would they have greater influence on the institutions of the community. And thus, in doing so, even those members of the community who were not observant of Torah and mitzvos would have more Judaism.

In addition, the general Jewish community of Frankfurt did not want to lose the members of the Orthodox Jewish community, and so they were prepared to do almost everything they were asked to do. And ultimately, they even appointed an Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Mordechai Horowitz.

The new rabbi required that they build a large community mikvah in Frankfurt strictly according to Halachah, and that all the shoctim (kosher butchers) and butcher shops be exclusively under his certification. He also required that his rabbinical court be composed exclusively of strictly religious rabbis. Once they met those initial requirements, he accepted the position.

And thus, because of the dispute between Rabbi Hirsch and Rabbi Bamberger, there were two Orthodox Jewish communities in Frankfurt right up to WWII—one, the Orthodox community that was part of the Grossgemeinde, the general old-time Jewish community, and two, Kehal Adath Jeshurun, Rabbi Hirsch's community, which had seceded per Rabbi Hirsch's view.

Avraham and Lot

Now, this debate was over what was the right thing to do—to secede completely and create an independent new community, or to stay part of the existing community and try to influence it from the inside. And this debate has actually been running for thousands of years, and the solution is not something that the Jewish community can come up with as a whole but rather, something that must be resolved locally by each community and its own rabbis. After all, it depends greatly on the time, place and many other factors.

But this big question already existed 4,000 years ago, in the life of Avraham Avinu himself.

In this week's Torah portion of Lech Lecha, we read about how Avraham Avinu left Charan along with his wife Sarah and nephew Lot, traveling together to the

Land of Canaan. The Torah then tells us that “there was a famine in the Land,” resulting in Avraham, Sarah and Lot traveling down to Egypt. There, there is an entire episode involving Sarah, which ends with the Pharaoh sending them back to Canaan. However, before he sends them off, the Pharaoh enriches Avraham, giving him sheep and cattle, servants and maids, etc.

So they go back to Canaan—and there the problems begin.

In Chapter 13, we read, “And there was a fight between the shepherds of Avram and Lot.” What was the fight? Rashi says: “Lot’s shepherds were sinners who grazed their animals in others’ fields, and Avram’s shepherds would rebuke them over the theft.” Now, why did Avram’s shepherds care so much about what Lot’s shepherds were doing? Rashi says that “their faces were similar”—Avraham and Lot looked alike. The embarrassing behavior of Lot’s shepherds reflected poorly on Avraham.

People didn’t differentiate between them and they’d say, “Look what’s happening here! The great Avraham himself, who personally spread monotheistic faith in the Creator, keeps the company of criminals! His shepherds graze his animals in others’ fields. People didn’t get into the little details that they were Lot’s shepherds, not Avraham’s—as far as they were concerned, it was one family.

So, Avraham suggested to Lot, “Please separate from me”—let’s establish two different communities; wherever you go, I’ll go the other direction. Avraham even pledged to help Lot in doing so. He said, as Rashi tells us, that “I shall not distance myself from you, and I shall stand by you as a shield and an aide.” But they still needed to separate.

What did Lot do? He chose to settle in Sodom—and the Torah immediately emphasizes, “and the people of Sodom were very evil and sinful unto G-d.” And to that, Rashi adds, “Nevertheless, Lot didn’t hesitate to dwell among them.”

Two Approaches

Was that the right decision?

The Torah immediately goes on in the next verse to say, “And G-d said to Avram after Lot had parted from him...” Rashi says that the reason that G-d is suddenly

speaking to Avraham now and not earlier is because as long as Lot was there, G-d wouldn't talk to Avraham. It was only after they parted ways that G-d again revealed Himself to him.

We thus have it that it was the right step to take. However, the Midrash quotes yet another opinion. In the Midrash Rabbah (41), we are told that Rabbi Yehudah says, "Our Patriarch Avraham was angry when his brother's son Lot separated from him; [and] G-d said, 'He cleaves to everyone, but to Lot his brother he does not cleave?!'" According to Rabbi Yehudah, it was *not* a good idea for Lot and Avraham to part ways—because ultimately, it caused Lot to go and live in Sodom. If he had stayed with his uncle Avraham, then his proximity to Avraham would have influenced him to stay at a higher spiritual level.

What's more, we might even say that Avraham Avinu's behavior falls into the "pre-Matan Torah" category, or that of before the Torah was given on Mt. Sinai, for when the Jewish Nation received the Torah while at the foot of Mt. Sinai, we are told that they were "responsible for one another." Thus, ever since, every Jew has the obligation to see to it that every other Jew keep as many mitzvos as possible—no one can take the hands-off stance of "please separate from me."

And as the Rebbe explains with regards to the proverbial "evil son" of the Hagaddah, of whom it is said, "If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed"—specifically *there*, in Egypt, would he have not been redeemed. But after the Giving of the Torah? Then, every Jew can be redeemed! And, the Rebbe concludes, we each have a responsibility for each one of them. (Likutei Sichos Vol. I, pg. 252.)

In any case, even if distances are maintained, we still cannot shirk our responsibilities towards all our fellow Jews, regardless of who they may be. As the Rebbe points out in a Sichah, even after Avraham separated from Lot, the Torah tells us that Avraham still went out to war, risking his life so as to save Lot... to the point that he influenced Lot to later risk his own life to host guests when he was living in Sodom, despite the risk. (Hisvaduyos 5750, Vol. I, pg. 331.)

Thus, Avraham Avinu paved the way for Jewish self-sacrifice—even for a person like Lot.

Good Shabbos!