

Rabbi Mark Cohn

Parashat Lech Lecha 2021/5782

You gotta know when to hold 'em ... know when to fold 'em

After viewing a slide detailing the lineage of Avram's family...

Gen. 12:1-3) The Lord had said to Avram, "Go from your land, the place of your birth and your father's house to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

We know this story.

And then they go to Egypt b/c there is a famine in the land.

And Abraham (Avram) tells Sarah (Sarai) to pretend she is his sister not wife, so that it will go well for him, Avram. And it does - the end of the story (or chapter) is that they will leave Egypt with great wealth but not before Sarah winds up having to be in the Pharaoh's harem, presumably sleeping with him, and bringing a plague upon the Pharaoh's house which causes the Pharaoh to realize something is not right. And in an effort to make good in the eyes of God - not Avram, he sends Avram and Sarai out with a bunch of gifts: flocks and herds.

I'll be reading from the section when they leave Egypt and settle in the land shown and promised them by God but it turns out that their possessions are too many. It's not that the land is not big enough - but the stuff they have brought along with them is too much.

Avram and Lot both have a lot of possessions. And their baggage is weighing them down. It's the possessions - not just the herds - that are problematic.

Space is a relative term. When you are with someone you love and have an uncomplicated relationship - you can snuggle up right next to them. Other times, an entire city may be too small to hold the baggage that exists between people or groups.

Remember: Avram is the oldest of three sons. His youngest brother married, had children, and died. He has married one of his nieces. The other niece went to his middle brother. His nephew Lot is effectively his son.

In the Torah we hear about a Levirate marriage. If a woman's husband dies, she is to be given the next available (in age) brother of her deceased husband. Why?

For our ancestors - holding family and, ultimately, tribal units together was a critical value. First off, women and children needed a source of financial and familial stability and the husband, father, son roles were critical for women and children. Some might get all kinds of squeamish about that today - but that is only because we have different ideas about what constitutes family or what we consider proper roles. The shared values we have with our ancestors and why these texts hold our attention are of critical importance: family structure, support, provision. Those values have not gone out of style - even while our definition of what family is or where the borders lie may adjust over time: for better or for worse.

Why do Lot and Avram separate as we see in the parasha?

I've always thought that the solution to separate suggested by Avram makes sense. Not surprisingly: there are disputes between the herdsmen of Lot and Avram. Note: not between uncle and nephew - between their staffs. First off, that they have staffs is incredible. But in order to keep the order, Avram says: let's separate - the land can carry us both. Perhaps though, what is happening between the herdsmen may be indicative of what is underlying the relationship between uncle and nephew.

Sometimes in life, we need to separate from difficult situations. It is healthier for the whole.

The rabbis, of course, come to ask if that was the best decision on the part of Avram and Lot. Why doesn't Avram say: Should we try to work this out? Maybe Avram did. Maybe Lot did. Maybe they didn't and Avram breathed a sigh of relief when Lot 'lifted his eyes' and saw the expansive land.

During our lives, there are moments to separate and there are moments to come together. It will happen again in chapter 21 with Hagar and Ishmael at the weaning party for Isaac. I think there was a musical sage who once said, "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em; Know when to walk away and know when to run."

This story of Avram and Lot separating is painful. Or maybe it is wise. It can be both.

Their relationship is not over yet - but things will not go so well for Lot (or his wife).

Whose fault is that?

Where does danger start?

Where does complication start or end?

Terah left Ur for unknown reasons. Maybe he was going to change his luck or that of his family.

Maybe it was too painful to stay. We look to Avram as the man who begins the journey but it was actually his father. The family's pain will continue and it does all the way to us hundreds of generations later. And while that family's pain is our pain, that family's journey is our journey, it is our foundational story - in many ways as much as the slavery in and Exodus from Egypt. And God says to Avram that we have a chance to make blessing happen. V'hehyeh b'racha. "You shall be a blessing." That line is conditional and aspirational. It is a hope for what we can be and what we can become. We have the chance to bring genuine blessing about and we have the chance to ... not. It is on us. God has our back if we have each other's.

Those who curse us will bring curse upon themselves.
Those who bless us will bring blessing upon themselves.

Because we often become that which we aspire to become - not physically necessarily but emotionally and spiritually.

May the journey be blessed.

May we remember those who started our paths and may we make these paths our own with honor, respect, humility, and grace. May we understand the difficulties and places to join or separate; to hold and to let go.