

anticipation and excitement were palpable. Five minutes elapsed, and then five more minutes – yet no one walked through the doors. After half an hour, the defense attorney spoke again. “I have been watching each and every one of you. During this past half-hour, when you were all supposedly so certain that my client had perpetrated all of these crimes, you still could not avert your eyes from those doors. Why? Because you were not really sure that the real criminal would not walk in! If you were so certain of my client’s guilt, why did you look at the door? Aha! You are not certain. Then you must acquit my client!”

The entire courtroom was in a state of shock and pandemonium. Finally, the room quieted down, and the prosecutor rose to address the court: “While all of you turned in your seats to glance at the doors, I kept my eyes glued on one person: the defendant. During this entire drama presented by the attorney for the defense, not once did the defendant turn toward the doors. Do you want to know why? It is because he knew quite well that no one was walking through the doors, because the guilty party was sitting right here.” He pointed to the defendant and sat down.

Great story. Now for the lesson. First and foremost, we must thank Hashem for distinguishing us from the rest of the world. Our laws, based upon our Torah, separate us from the lost, misguided and confused people who search for a life of meaning and principle. We are so secure in our beliefs; we know for sure that our Torah is true and immutable, that we are like the defendant who never bothered looking up at the doors, because he knew the truth: no one was coming through the doors, because he was the criminal! Avraham *Halvri* stood alone against an entire world of confusion. They stared at the doors because they were misled by the guile and rhetoric of their convincing priests. We did not bother to look up, because we not only knew the truth – we were living it. I think it was *Horav Chaim Soloveitzick, zl*, who put *emunah*, faith, in Hashem in its proper perspective, when he said, “For the believer, there are no questions; for the non-believer, there are no answers.” How true.

יורק את חניכיו ילדי ביתו

**He armed his disciples who had been born in his house.
(14:14)**

A war was to be waged in order to rescue Lot. Avraham *Avinu* wasted no time in gathering his students and setting out to the battlefield. Obviously, the Torah has a reason for relating this piece of history. Certainly, it is not to teach us about Avraham’s physical prowess and his skill as a soldier and as a general. Indeed, the image of our Patriarch that is presented in this *parshah* is blurred. On the one hand, *Chazal* teach that Avraham took hold of a hammer and smashed his father’s idols. He followed this up by arming himself and going out to war against those who had taken Lot captive. On the other hand, Avraham is the *amud ha’chesed*, Pillar of Kindness, the individual who reached out with love and sensitivity to a primitive, cruel, spiritually dispassionate world. He

welcomed strangers and taught them the most important spiritual lesson: monotheism. All the while, he was sustaining them physically. What was Avraham? Was he kind and benevolent, or was he an extremist who lifted up the sword against those who acted improperly?

Truthfully, we find two individuals in the Torah who acted paradoxically: Avraham and Pinchas. Avraham was considered a *Kohen* to Hashem. While he became the beneficiary of the *Kehunah*, Priesthood, from Malkitzedek, who lost it due to his unsuitability, Pinchas earned the *Kehunah* due to his zealotness in avenging Hashem’s Name. Both became *Kohanim* after acting zealously. It all depends upon one’s focus and mission statement. Avraham and Pinchas served Hashem with great devotion. Thus, whatever was necessary, whatever action had to be taken to ensure that Hashem’s Name remain glorified – they took, regardless of how unpopular it might have made them.

Va’ani Tefillah

ואת ענינו את השנה הואת – Bareich Aleinu es ha’shanah ha’zos.

The *Zohar HaKadosh* teaches that *nitzotzos ha’kedushah*, holy sparks, which contain the Divine Light, are imbedded all over the physical world within *klipos*, shells, of impurity. When one makes a *brachah* prior to food consumption, he releases these holy sparks which ultimately attach to him. If he does not make a blessing, or if the food lacks appropriate spiritual standards, the holiness disappears and the impurity of the *klipos* attach to the soul of the person who consumes this food. This ultimately causes him to wane in his service to Hashem, until he eventually completely turns his back on Hashem. *Horav Yehonasan Eibeshutz, zl*, contends that this might be the reason we observe people gravitating toward sinful behavior following a meal. Since they had not been careful in guarding the sanctity of the meal, the impurity of the food attaches to them. It is almost as if one who is about to drive to a place of sin stops to “fill up” with gas.

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Parashas Lech Lecha

תשע"ה

פרשת לך לך

**לך לך... ואנשך לנוי גדול
Go for yourself... and I will make of you a great nation.
(12:1,2)**

The term/class/status, minority, implies deficiency to a certain extent. Indeed, in contemporary society (and probably much earlier), the appellation, minority, relegates its members, or member, to an implied second-class status. This, of course, is dependent on the individual or individuals who fall under this status, either imposed by the members of the majority or self-imposed – due to a desire to segregate themselves from the majority. Having said this, we will analyze our People’s status – both vis-à-vis the world community and among ourselves.

Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl, lived during a period of turmoil within the Jewish community of Germany and, by extension, Western Europe. The scourge of the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment, had begun to rear its head following the French Revolution, and Jews were falling prey to its allure. They preached assimilation: Why remain a minority against the entire world? Why be different? The average Jew, whose level of education matched the pride he had in his heritage, had long ago succumbed to the economic and social hardships that have challenged our People at every juncture, gobbled up their poisonous rhetoric and soon thereafter reneged his commitment to Judaism. *Rav Hirsch* succeeded in stemming the tide and, ultimately, reversing the trend. He taught them that for a Jew to be a minority is a privilege, an honor, and an integral aspect of his identity.

Avraham *Avinu* established this principle when he listened to Hashem’s call of, *Lech Lecha*, “Go for yourself!” – go your own way. Do not concern yourself with what others will think. Do not fear isolation – not if it means separating yourself from hedonistic pagans bent on destroying the very fibre of moral values, the core principles upon which the nation of which you will be the progenitor will build their future. Without morals, we are not a nation; indeed, we are not human. It is no less true today than it was thousands of years ago, when our Patriarch had to stand up for what was proper and true.

It was a time in which isolation was denigrated. The *dor haflagah*, generation of the Dispersion, declared, *Naase lanu shem*, “Let us make ourselves a name.” They built a tower to glorify their collective selves – not the individual. It was all about centralization – not individual self-worth. Centralization recognized the group – not the status of the individual who was merely an underling, a cog in the wheel, a brick in the cooperative structure. This concept, explains *Rav Hirsch*, gives rise to the false notion that the majority holds the power of authority and that everything which the majority

decides is good is automatically considered good and mutually accepted by the group.

Judaism believes in the power of the majority, but this is only when it represents all that is truly sacred and sublime. When the majority expounds and is attached to the sacred truth, then we join with them in total harmony. If not, then we adhere to the principle of *lech lecha*, go your own way. We do not determine the veracity or suitability of our actions based upon those idolized by the majority. Our Patriarch Avraham taught us, by example, that the majority does not have the power to hold sway over the individual.

We have survived throughout the millennia because we are imbued with Avraham *Avinu’s* courage to be a minority. This was the very first Jewish directive: Stand up for what is just and proper. If it is not the paradigm of absolute truth – leave! We do not “go with the flow.” It takes courage, resolution, and conviction. It requires strength – not physical prowess, but emotional stamina. Hashem said to Avraham, *V’e’escha l’goi gadol*, “I will make you into a great nation,” not a large nation – a great nation. We are measured by quality – not by quantity. We stand alone, as a minority, singular in our belief, proud of our heritage, and strong in our relationship with Hashem – which takes precedence over everything.

When a Jew feels the need to impress; to be accepted on par with everyone else, to follow the pattern of life and perspective which has become the standard of the minority – then this Jew is deficient in his Judaism. What could be more satisfying than walking with G-d? What could be more edifying than daring to be alone? What could be greater than being a member of the nation made great by G-d?

Lech lecha; go for yourself. This is the reason that some have difficulty reconciling themselves with being in the minority, with standing resolute against the allure and misguided beliefs of the majority. In order to “go for yourself,” one must know and acknowledge himself/herself. One must come to terms with who he/she is. One must confront his/her own identity. If one does not know his/her *lecha/yourself*, then the *lech* – “go” – is of no value.

ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן

And the souls they made in Charan. (12:5)

Avraham *Avinu* was the *amud ha’chesed*, pillar of kindness. What was his greatest kindness? It was reaching out to people and teaching them about Hashem. To save a person from the clutches of idol worship and inculcate him with belief in monotheism is the greatest act of kindness, because this person has been saved – not only spiritually, but physically as well. We involve ourselves in all forms

of *chesed* projects, but the most basic act of reaching out to our estranged brethren seems to elude us. This is especially true if the subject is in an environment that is foreign to us or does not sit well with our sensitivities. People that are in restricted environments; those who are unwell and infirm; those who are victims of various forms of abuse and addiction: are at the bottom of the list of those whom we are prepared to help. When our acts of *chesed* are prefixed with dollar signs, a preference criteria of whom we will help and when – our *chesed* is really self-focused and not worthy very much. Avraham Avinu set the standards for *chesed*; he had no criteria and no preferences. He reached out to everyone, whenever, and wherever and whomever needed him.

Why is it that many observant, good people, who are well-meaning and sensitive, shy away from acts of *chesed* to those who just do not fit in their comfort zones? For some reason, we Jews have the ability to live a life filled with contradictions. Some will call this modern or centrist, when, in fact, it is a life of contradictions. We will go out of our way to perform acts of kindness, but, if the beneficiary does not fit into our guidelines for humanity, we will defer to others – at times, those who are not observant.

I read about the funeral arrangements for Cardinal Jean-Marie Listiger, the long-time Archbishop of France. He was a confidante of Pope John Paul II and had risen to a pinnacle in the Catholic Church, a level which is attained by only a select few. So what was so special about this? People work diligently and remain focused on achieving a specific goal; is it that strange if they make it? This would be true had Cardinal Listiger been born a devout Catholic. He was, however, born a Jew! As a fourteen year-old boy, he hid in a convent in France while his mother was murdered in Auschwitz. It is well-known that he kept his parents' *yahrzeits* and even recited *Kaddish* for them. He asked that the *Kaddish* be recited for him at his funeral in front of Notre Dame! Now, that is a contradiction! Was he the first to live a life of contradiction? Certainly not, and, sad to say, he was not the last.

Chesed is founded upon the principle of care, sensitivity, empathy; its basic foundation does not allow for the “convenience” of contradiction. Yet, there are those whose attitude toward *chesed* is filled with contradictions. If they are following the standard set forth by our Patriarch, then they had better check their GPS. Our Patriarch was *yashar*, straight, and did not sway or wane in his commitment. Why do we?

At times, the most difficult question can be elucidated with a simple answer. I think the greatest *chesed* that we can perform for someone is to attempt to figure out what makes him tick, what drives him to act in a different manner. In other words, are we prepared to understand and accept another person's situation? True, he may act in a weird manner, but he might have a good reason for his strange behavior. The fellow that has been locked away for various felonies, both moral and ethical, which might make us cringe (and they should!) or infringe upon our sensibilities, has a criminal history and pathology that have brought him to this stage. Perhaps if we try to comprehend his situation, we might understand his mindset. This, I think is the greatest act of *chesed*. This is empathy at its apex. While this might be the author's personal perspective, it has been inspired by an incredible story.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski relates the following incident which took place when he was the resident psychiatrist in a large

state hospital. This hospital catered primarily to hundreds of mentally-challenged patients. At times, medical students came to see and study cases, which, although they may have been discussed in psychiatric literature, were to be found only in such a resident facility. He took the group to the chronic care building, where they housed the most difficult cases, ie, the patients who were hardest to reach. He introduced them to the unit's senior resident, a man who had spent the last 52 years in the hospital. He was presently 69 years old.

The patient, whom we will call “Sam,” had not spoken a word in 52 years. Other than his daily routine, which consisted of a weird practice, he seemed docile and harmless. Every day, following breakfast, he would walk to a corner of the community room and assume a strange position on the floor, his body erect and his hands directed upward. It almost looked as if he were holding up something invisible. He remained in this position until lunch, after which he would return until dinner and thereafter until bedtime. This had gone on every day for the last 52 years. No therapy, medication or innovative electric shock treatment had succeeded in altering his behavior. No amount of convincing could get him to sit down on a chair in a normal manner – except for meals.

During the visit, one of the medical students asked for permission to speak to the patient. Although he wondered what impact the student's conversation could have on the patient, if decades of variegated psychiatric treatment had proven fruitless, nonetheless, Rabbi Twerski said, “Certainly, go for it.”

The student went over to the patient, smiled, and said, “Why don't you sit down for a bit? I will take over.” The man looked at the student with his blank look – no words, no smile, no recognition. The student then assumed the same contorted position of the patient, perfectly paralleling his posture, and repeated, “Why not sit down now? I will take over for you.” Without a word, for the first time in fifty-two years, the patient left his position and sat down in a chair!

What happened? First and foremost, there is no rationale to explain the behavior of one who is mentally challenged. We do not know for certain what is going on in his mind. Rabbi Twerski concluded, however, that, quite possibly, this man believed that the world was going to fall and he alone was able to support it. Clearly, when one carries such an awesome responsibility on his shoulders, no entreaty will move him to let go – until someone else relieves him. The fact that he took meal breaks and sleeping time off – well, I said there is no rhyme or reason to the actions of such a person.

For fifty-two years, this man was dismissed as insane. No one ever bothered getting into his mind, attempting to reach out and give him some consideration. He was labeled as strange and left to rot for half a century. It took the compassion and sensitivity of the medical student to make the attempt to get into the patient's mind in order to try to understand what made him tick – differently. Furthermore, finally, a connection was established between a mind that had wavered off, that was no longer cogent, and one what was rational. Sadly, it was five decades too late.

Let us take this one step further. There is a gap between *frum*, observant, and non-observant. Gaps exist within the observant camp with some who seek to modernize, revolutionize the hallowed traditions and *halachos* to which we have adhered throughout the millennia. A gap exists between young and old, “off

the *derech*” teens and mainstream *yeshivishe*, *chassidish*, young people. While in no way shall we shift one iota from our beliefs, we might attempt to use compassion and common sense to peer into their minds, understand the pathologies, environment, and backgrounds from which they hail, or where they have regrettably made their home, in order to see that our differences are not necessarily ideological in nature, but rather, the result of insecurity, lack of self-esteem for various reasons, abuse and simply a lack of education.

Chesed begins at home. If we were to delve into the home and background of those with whom we differ, we might be surprised to discover that there is a “method to their madness.”

וגם ללוטם ההלך את אברם היה צאן ובקר ואהלים
Also Lot who went with Avram had Flocks, cattle and tents.
(13:5)

The Torah relates that Lot, who was traveling with Avraham Avinu, was very wealthy. Since the Torah wastes no words, informing us of Lot's wealth hardly seems significant. Why does the Torah mention it, and what are we to learn from it? *Rashi* explains that Lot's affluence was caused by his traveling with Avraham. How did *Rashi* understand that this is implied by the *pasuk*?

Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl, explains that every physical entity is a manifestation of a spiritual source. If Lot were wealthy, it could be traced back to its spiritual source. Lot's wealth was not created simply by chance or due to his astute business mind. His wealth was directly tied to his relationship with Avraham Avinu.

The following vignette echoes this concept. On one of his trips to the Diaspora, *Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, Shlita*, was asked if it were really necessary to have so many able-bodied young men studying Torah full-time in *Kollel*. First, it places a “strain” on the “working” community who are asked to do their share in supporting Torah study. Second, probably throughout most of our history, there was not nearly such a high percentage of young men devoting themselves to full-time Torah study. *Rav Shteinman* replied that actually the question should be asked in the opposite way. Why do we need such a high percentage of wealthy Jews today, when, in fact, throughout our history, most of the Jewish People have been poor?

Rav Shteinman explained that the reason such affluence exists among the Jewish People is specifically because there are so many *bnei Torah* studying in *Kollel*. They require support in order to learn. Thus, Hashem has spread the wealth to a greater percentage of Jews – for this purpose. If there were to be fewer men learning Torah full-time – there would be no need for such wealth. Spiritual bounty generates financial prosperity. Lot was blessed with material bounty because he traveled with Avraham. It is not as if Avraham lacked material assets. He was doing quite well. Lot, however, was blessed, so that he could share. We should not make the mistake of thinking that Hashem blesses us so that we can build mansions and live in opulence. The money we have is for the specific purpose of sharing.

ויבא הפליטם ויגיד לאברם העברי
Then there came the fugitive and told Avram, the Ivri.
(14:13)

Avram *halvri*, the conjunctive name, Avram the *Ivri*, is

found only once in the Torah. It defines our Patriarch as being on one side, the other side, alone against the world. An individual whose moral, spiritual and ethical compass stood in stark contrast to that of the entire world – and continues to do so until this very day. Some people need to be popular, to receive public accolades, to be surrounded by the crowds, to be accepted by everyone. We understand that public appeal and acclaim can be dangerous snares that might devour a weak person. They are willing to compromise under the guise of flexibility, bend and even pervert their principles in order to be accepted by those whose endorsement we should revile.

Avram *halvri* – “The entire world was (is) on one side; and he is on the other side” (*Midrash Rabbah Bereishis* 42:8). Two points can be gleaned from this statement: the world is against Avraham; Avraham is against the world. *Horav Moshe Neriyah, zl*, explains that Nimrod's world, the world of hedonism and idol worship, was against Avraham. Also, the world of the King of Sodom, a world of Draconian justice, oppressive treatment of the weak and deprived, had Avraham in their crosshairs. He took on this harsh, cruel world which subjected innocent people to the most brutal punishment, just because they acted compassionately to strangers. Avraham fought them with kindness, teaching the world that cruelty was the antithesis of G-d's Divine Plan. Nimrod and Sodom – neither one cared for Avraham – both wanted him out of the picture. Thus, he was alone, isolated from the world. His world revolved around Hashem. Their world was its antithesis. His descendants have learned (or should have learned) that we have no place within the world community. *Am levadad yishkon*, “A nation that will dwell in solitude” (*Bamidbar* 23:9). This is the only way. Unfortunately, not everyone can handle such a lifestyle. They require acceptance. Thus, they first acculturate and then assimilate, and they eventually outdo the Nimrods and Sodomites. When we breach the fence that should separate us, we demonstrate our insecurity and lack of pride, and then, ultimately, we become one with them.

In *Niflasecha Asicha*, *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, quotes a meaningful analogy from a *Maggid*. The justice system in most civilized countries, such as the United States, is based on the skills (or lack thereof) of two lawyers: the prosecutor and defense attorney. Justice is not based upon proof, testimony, reality, but rather, on rhetoric, acting, sleight of mouth, illusion and delusion. In other words, truth does not always prevail. It is mostly a game of skill between two attorneys.

One time, an infamous criminal whose record spanned years, was finally apprehended and brought to trial. The prosecutor presented a brilliant case, citing each and every crime, describing it slowly, vividly, depicting the cruelty and greed of the criminal. He did a masterful job of presenting an airtight case for the prosecution. The criminal was going away for a few “centuries.”

The defense attorney was brilliant. He arose from his seat next to the defendant and faced the jury: “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, my words on behalf of the defendant are superfluous, because, in five minutes, the real perpetrator of these crimes will enter this hallowed room.” He pointed to the two large entrance doors and said, “In five minutes, those doors will open up and in will come the guilty one!”

The drama in the courtroom was incredible. The