

So Avram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between me and you... please separate from me.” (12:8,9)

Chazal teach us that *maasei Avos siman labanim*, “The actions of the Fathers are a sign for the sons.” The Torah is teaching us that the varied approaches to life’s challenges encountered by the Patriarchs serve as a portent and guide for their descendants to follow and emulate. They are teaching us the correct path to take upon confronting similar situations. Clearly, as in all “maps,” it takes the educated and discerning eye of a teacher to explain the meaning of various actions, the underlying reason for taking such action, and the lessons to be derived. This brings us to Avraham *Avinu*’s separation from Lot. Let us ignore the fact that Lot was family, a close student, and Avraham was the only mentor that he had. It is surprising that Avraham, whose entire life was comprised of reaching out to the unaffiliated, would separate from Lot. Avraham personified the *middah*, attribute, of *chesed*, kindness. Is there a greater and more significant kindness than bringing someone under the *kanfei ha’Shechinah*, wings of the Divine Presence? Furthermore, Hashem apparently agreed with Avraham’s actions, since He did not appear to Avraham as long as Lot was with him.

Horav Arye Leib Bakst, zl, derives from here that reaching out to a fellow Jew has its limits. While it is wonderful *chesed*, and truly the most remarkable favor one can do for his fellow Jew, there comes a time when the answer must be “no.” I cannot risk my own *ruchniyos*, spirituality, in order to provide *chesed* for another Jew. One must have priorities in his life, and his own spirituality must be one of those priorities. Our Patriarch was prepared to go to great lengths on behalf of his nephew. He risked his life to save Lot during the War of the Kings. He did not shirk from any *chesed* that was asked of him. When their relationship endangered his spirituality, however, Avraham backed off.

While the answer is obvious, it still does not explain why Avraham would be spiritually diminished by Lot. Our Patriarch was not your average *tzaddik*. He towered above everyone. How could Lot have an effect on him? I think the answer lies in the words – *al na tehi merivah beini u’beinach*. “Please let there be no strife between me and you.” Avraham could deal with every spiritual challenge Lot could throw at him, except for one: *machlokes*, dispute/argument/controversy. The poison of a *machlokes* has a malignant effect on all of the participants. Since one cannot have an argument unless two people are involved, Avraham would reluctantly be implicated. He recognized that if their relationship were to continue, it would end in dispute. Understanding that *machlokes* must be circumvented at all costs, Avraham was determined to distance himself from Lot.

Having said this, we return to the main thrust of this lesson. Avraham *Avinu* teaches us that one may exert all efforts, expend all costs, give all of himself in his quest to perform *chesed*. This is true only with regard to *gashmiyus*, material/physical *chesed*. Time, energy, and expense are all commendable when one is carrying out acts of kindness that do not infringe on his spirituality. Once his spiritual dimension is impacted; if his spiritual growth becomes impeded, he must

immediately desist. There comes a time when one must declare: *hipared na meialai*, "Please separate from me."

Kiruv-- outreach, to the unaffiliated, the alienated, and the assimilated-- is the most noble form of *chesed* one can perform for a fellow Jew. It avails him the opportunity to save a life. A life devoid of spirituality, a life without G-d, is not a life. It is an existence. The *kiruv* fellow literally performs spiritual resuscitation when he reaches out, but – and there truly is a "but"- there are times and circumstances when the risks outweigh the benefits. When the *kiruv* fellow himself is spiritually frail, when the conditions under which he must work, and the environment in which he finds himself, are actually too much for him to overcome, he must relinquish his role, discontinue his relationship. One may not destroy himself to help others. It must be *hipared na meialai*.

Avraham, the pillar of *chesed*, taught us the meaning of *chesed* and when it is applicable and when it is dangerous. We cannot run on emotion, allowing our sentiment and sensitiveness to prevail over reason and logic. A physician does not treat family, because he must remain objective. A *kiruv* fellow must determine the rationality of his endeavor based upon common sense and dialectic. If he might personally sustain a spiritual blow, he must follow the lesson set forth by the Patriarch: *Hipared na meialai*.