

LECH LECHA (GENESIS 12:1-17:27)

The Reward for a Mitzvah...

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

We've all heard of the city of Sodom. That's the city that, along with Gemorrah and some smaller cities, was destroyed by G-d because of its decadence. Before that fateful event, Abraham gave up the opportunity to become its king.

As the result of a regional battle between several kings, Sodom was defeated and Lot was captured. Lot, the nephew and brother-in-law of Abram (his name had not yet been changed to Abraham) had been attracted to the materialism of Sodom and moved there. Abram was informed that Lot was in danger and organized a military force to liberate Sodom.

After the defeat of Sodom's captors, the king of Sodom approached Abram with a request. Unlike the surrounding neighbors of today's State of Israel, the king accepted the fact that according to international rules of war, "to the victor go the spoils." As such, he recognized Abram as the new king of Sodom. However, he requested an exception:

"Give me the people. You can keep the property." (Genesis (14:21)

The king didn't mind allowing Abram to take possession of the vast riches and real estate of his kingdom. Abram could now become rich beyond his wildest dreams. All the king wanted was to continue as the monarch of his now-humbled realm. He must have been shocked by the response:

"I lift my hand to G-d... (to swear that I will not take as much as) a string or a sandal strap or anything that is yours. You will not have the opportunity to claim 'I made Abram rich!' " (Ibid, 22-23)

Abram had total faith in G-d's promise to provide for him. He wanted the entire world to see that whatever he possessed was a gift from G-d. Any claims to the contrary would water down the message of G-d's Providence. Therefore, he refused the offer. The king could keep his wealth as well as his subjects.

G-d rewarded Abram's faith. Abram showed that he had total faith in G-d to give him his material needs. Since Abram refused money from the king, G-d rewarded him with...*Mitzvahs!*

As a reward for refusing to accept something as insignificant as a Sodomite strand of string, Abram's children were given the Mitzvah of *Tzitzis*, the strings that are tied onto the four-cornered *Tallis*. Because Abram wouldn't accept as much as a sandal strap from Sodom, his children were given the Mitzvah of

Tefillin, which are tied on with leather straps.

Abram refused the material wealth that gives us comfort only in this world. He was given the spiritual wealth of G-d's Commandments, which provide for us in the next world.

A great selfless act on the part of our great patriarch. However, he still could have done more. The Talmud (Nedarim 32a) tells us that Abram made a big mistake that day. He is taken to task for not reversing the king's request.

Abram is rewarded for refusing the king's offer of money. But he should also have refused the king's request to remain the ruler of Sodom.

Abram was the Great Teacher. He was the one who taught the world that there is one G-d in the world and that we need to serve Him with piety and self-control. Perhaps, had Abram become the king of Sodom, he might have been able to teach them how to live lives of morality and justice. Instead, the old king returned to Sodom. As a result, Sodomite society, with its "X-Rated" system of "morals," returned to its wicked and self-destructive ways.

It's not good enough to be righteous. We also have to teach others to be righteous.

Have a great Shabbos.

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