

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

The Salem Trial

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

It was a major superpower summit. The most powerful men in the world were about to meet.

BACKGROUND: Chapter 14 of Genesis describes what should probably be called the First World War. Five kings went to war against four kings. The four kings -- of Shinar (Babylon/Iraq), Ellasar (Greece), Elam, and Goiim (Rome) battled the five kings -- of the Canaanite cities of Sodom, Gemorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela.

The battle raged on for years. Finally, the four allied nations defeated the five. In the process, they conquered the city of Sodom and kidnapped Abram's nephew Lot. They put him on public display (Midrash Hagadol) and looked forward to receiving a substantial ransom from his rich uncle. (Sforno)

That was a mistake. Abram gathered his troops, and with Divine assistance, routed the enemy and released the hostages. Some (or all) of the enemy kings were killed, and the Hebrew chieftain was now seen as a man to be reckoned with.

THE SUMMIT: Abram was about to meet with Malchizedek. Malchizedek too, was a man to be reckoned with. Better known as Shem, son of Noah, father of the Semitic nations, he was a Kohain, a Priest. He was the king of Salem. (Salem, or *Shaleim* in Hebrew, was later called *Yireh* by Abram. Today we know this city by its two names; *Yireh* + *Shaleim* = *Yerushalayim* -- Jerusalem.) Malchizedek was more than a little interested in the above-mentioned conflict. After all, his son, Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam, had been killed in his battle against Abram.

What would happen when these two leaders would meet? Would Malchizedek try to avenge the death of his son? Would Abram reprimand his elderly ancestor (Abram, too, was a Semite) for raising such a wicked son?

The meeting went well:

*Malchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of G-d. . . He blessed him, saying, 'Blessed is Ab**ram . . . and blessed is G-d, who has delivered your enemies into your hands.' He (Ab**ram) gave him a tenth (a tithe for the Kohain) of everything. (Genesis, 14:18-20)*

Malchizedek bore no grudge against Abram; on the contrary, he welcomed him, and made a "*L'Chayim!*"

Malchizedek's status as a Kohain is of interest. Most commentaries assume that he was a Priest long before this event. (That's why Abram brought him tithes.) The Chasam Sofer takes a very different position. He suggests that Malchizedek became a Kohain AS A RESULT of this meeting:

The Talmud (Yoma, 61) says that if a person wants to pour wine onto the Altar as a sacrifice in the Temple, he should give wine to scholars. This, explains the Chasam Sofer, is the equivalent of pouring wine on the Altar. Additionally, we are told (Chagiga, 17) that a person's table can atone for sins.

On the basis of the above, the Chasam Sofer reads the verse as follows: *Malchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine*; (WHICH HE SERVED TO THE GREAT AND RIGHTEOUS SCHOLAR, ABRAM. AS A RESULT, HE WAS CONSIDERED TO BE BRINGING AN OFFERING ON THE ALTAR, AND, AS SUCH,) *he (BECAME)... a priest of G-d...*

To be completely candid, I don't get it. The Chasam Sofer is suggesting that by giving Abram a drink of wine, Malchizedek was doing a holy act. BY POURING HIM A DRINK??!!

Didn't we read last week about Noah's downfall that came about through drinking wine? Didn't we read two weeks ago about Adam & Eve's downfall that came through wine? (According to one opinion in the Talmud. No commentaries, as far as I know, support the myth of an apple Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.) Next week, too, we will read of Lot compromising himself after having "one drink too many."

Since when is wine consumption praiseworthy? How did "Malchizedek-the-bartender" become "Malchizedek-the-Priest"?????

The answer, of course, is that it depends what you do with your wine. Wine can be used to celebrate a *Simcha*. Or it can be used to drown one's sorrows. Some people lift a cup of wine and recite G-d's praises at the Shabbos table. Others lift a cup of wine to become "high." Some people drink "To Life!" Others drink themselves to death.

A table, according to the Talmud, can be an Altar before G-d. We can take food and drink and elevate it to a spiritual level. A dinner table should be a place for the family to gather and share the day's experiences. Too often, it is a place where we park ourselves long enough to wolf down enough calories to get us to the next meal.

A Shabbos meal, especially, should be a spiritual experience. Songs, words of Torah, and yes, a few ounces of "adult beverages in moderation" can transform our meals into something holy. (On a personal note, nothing thrills me more than when someone tells me that my humble observations on the weekly

Torah Portion were a basis for discussion at the Shabbos table.)

Chassidim have made this concept into an art form. To attend a Chassidic "*Tisch*" ("Table") can be a very inspirational experience. The singing and dancing, the sublime devotion one experiences at such an event is absolutely uplifting.

To tell the truth, I had long been puzzled by this Chassidic approach, until a particular event occurred. I am what they call a "*Kalter Litvak*." (Literal translation: "Cold Lithuanian") I am not Chassidic in any way. I prefer the rational intellectual approach to serving G-d, rather than the emotional, mystical, and sometimes spontaneous route favored in Chassidic circles.

One thing that particularly confounded me was the Chassidic *Tisch*. After the Rebbe slices a piece of bread from the *Challah* loaf, the Chassidim try to get a slice of their own. After he pours some wine from the bottle, or takes a fruit from the bowl, the rest of the contents become a sought-after commodity. From my Lithuanian, rational perspective, I saw it almost as a personality cult. It is one thing to honor, in fact, to revere Torah scholars. *Litvaks* do that too! But I felt that trying to get leftovers takes it a bit far.

Several years ago, my hometown of Monsey, New York was visited by Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, of Blessed Memory, the Rebbe of Bobov. He was to conduct a Friday night *Tisch* at a local Yeshiva, and I decided to go. He was, after all, a great and famous man, a leader of thousands, and I wanted to see him.

I was spellbound. His Chassidim, like others, vied to receive something from his table, clearly not my style. But I couldn't take my eyes off the Rebbe. He recited *Kiddush* over the wine; he washed his hands and said the blessing over the bread, like any other religious Jew. But this Jew was different; I can't tell you how or why, it was something intangible. I can just say he was different.

Perhaps it was the fire in his eyes. Perhaps it was the tears he shed as he sang the Shabbos *Zemiros*, special "Hymns" that are recited at the table. Perhaps it was the fact that this man had lost everything at the hands of the Nazis and rebuilt the Bobover Chasidic dynasty on these shores. Perhaps it was the fact that one horrible night many years ago, he and his son prepared to die for their People. They were prepared to be tortured to death rather than give the Gestapo information that would condemn another Jew. Perhaps it was the fact that this man began a Yeshiva in Manhattan and fired a teacher for undermining his efforts two weeks into the year. He gave him 9 months salary and said, "I'd give you more, but this is all I have. If you need more, let me know." Perhaps it was the fact that this beautiful and holy man had given so much hope to those who despaired.

I don't know what it was, but every fiber of this man's being emanated *Kedushah* -- Sanctity. (**Please** take a few moments to view this video.)

I began to understand. The Chassidic message began to penetrate my thick Lithuanian skull.

Malchizedek is considered a priest because he served bread and wine to a man whose entire physical life was filled with holiness and devotion to G-d. When a person dedicates every moment of his life to the service of G-d, he sanctifies himself and the world around him. Even the most mundane aspects of his physical life take on a spiritual component. When Abram said a blessing before eating and drinking, he elevated that food to the status of an offering to G-d. Every aspect in the life of a *Tzaddik*, a righteous man, is a spiritual experience.

I now understood why the Bobover Chassidim were so attached to their Rebbe, of Blessed Memory. Did the *Kalter Litvak* become a *Heiser Chossid*? No. Did I start to spend every Friday night at a different Rebbe's *Tisch*? No. But I will tell you one thing.

I sure wish I could have gotten a piece of that *Challah*.

Have a great Shabbos.

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