BS"D

Parshas Lech Lecha

The self-deception of the king of Sodom, a city known as the center of extreme evil, is astounding. He actually claims spiritual equality.

**Avraham and the King of Sodom**

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

In this week's parsha, we read about the four kings who defeated the five kings, one of the five being the king of Sodom. Upon hearing the defeat, Avraham went forth to rescue his nephew Lot who had been living in Sodom. Avraham prevailed over the four kings and came back with the people who had been held captive and with the property of Sodom which the four kings had seized. The Torah tells us that the king of Sodom went out to greet Avraham. Instead of telling us about that meeting, the Torah interrupts that narrative with the story of Malki Tzeddek, King of Shalem, who brought bread and wine for Avraham and his men and blessed Avraham and G-d. Avraham in turn gave 1/10th of the spoils as a tithe to Malki Tzeddek. Then the Torah gets back to the King of Sodom. The king asked Avraham to return the captive people and said it was all right for Avraham to keep the spoils. Avraham said he would not keep any of the spoils, "even a string," although he would give the men who helped him in the war their share.

Why does the Torah interrupt the story of Avraham and the king of Sodom with the incident of Malki Tzeddek? There are many answers to this question, but I am going to discuss just one: the interpretation of the Ohr HaChaim.

But first I'd like to cite a few Midrashim on the story of Avraham's battle.

The Torah says concerning Avraham, "He mustered his retainers born into his household numbering 318." The Midrash (43:2) translates the word *vayarek*, he mustered, in many ways. He made their faces "pale." They refused to fight for him. They said, "If the five kings (of Sodom et al.) couldn’t stand up to them, how can we?

He made his own face "pale." He said to his men, "I will go out and die (in battle) to sanctify G-d's name."

He "armed" them with weapons.

He bribed them with "gold."

He emptied them out by declaring that (as the Torah says in Parshas Shoftim) anyone afraid could go home.

Indeed, the Midrash Tanchama adds that all of the 318 left! Only Avraham's loyal servant Eliezer remained who was worth as much as all of the 318. The numerical value of Eliezer is actually 318.

The Midrash also says (43:4) that the Torah says Avraham returned the women and the people (the men.) He did not return the children. They all "converted" to the faith of Avraham and became righteous and moral people, in contrast to their parents, the immoral Sodomites.

And finally, the Midrash (43:5) describes the king of Sodom's meeting with Avraham. "He wagged his tail at Avraham and said, “Just as you were saved from the fiery furnace, so was I saved from the bitumen pit,” (where the kings had fallen into). In other words, the miracle of the victory was because of *me*.

Now, let's get back to the Ohr HaChaim. There is a halacha (Bava Kema 1176) concerning a situation where a group of people are traveling and are attacked by highwaymen. If all of the group members had the ability to defend themselves, but only one came forward and fended off the robbers, they must split the rescued property. That is the case unless the rescuer made it clear that he was rescuing for himself only and the others made no objections, in which case the rescuer may keep all of the property himself. If the others could not possibly have rescued the property but for the strength and fortitude of the one rescuer, then definitely only he is entitled to the property.

The King of Sodom felt that he could have prevailed over the enemy despite his initial defeat. Therefore, although the actual victory had come through Avraham, the king of Sodom was entitled to all of his property since he too was a potential rescuer. The king of Sodom "wagged his tail," meaning he felt he was Avraham's equal. The miracle had happened for his sake, and therefore his property must be returned. This is what he wanted to tell Avraham when he went out to meet him. But then Malki Tzeddek blessed Avraham, and Avraham tithed the property and gave it to Malki Tzeddek. When the king of Sodom saw this, he realized that Avraham would not buy his argument. Since Avraham had given away a tithe he obviously felt that the property belonged to him; you can't give a donation from someone else's property.

After seeing this, the king of Sodom proposed a compromise to Avraham. They would split the spoils of war. The king would get the people and Avraham would get the property. The king's argument was totally fallacious. The king and his allies had been soundly defeated. They had barely escaped with their lives. The victory was possible only because of Avraham; legally Avraham was entitled to all of the spoils.

Of course, Avraham was not interested in the property in any event. Avraham gave a tithe to Malki Tzeddek. He gave a share to his helpers, and he gave all the rest back to the king of Sodom. Avraham was not interested in the wealth.

The Ohr HaChaim adds that the term of "wagging the tail," is very appropriate in this story. If you cut off a lizard's head, its tail still wags. So, too, the king of Sodom was totally defeated in war, but he wagged his tail in claiming a share in the victory that was, in fact, totally lacking.

One of the things the Ohr HaChaim's interpretation teaches us is how our own pride, our own false sense of self-esteem, can blind us to reality. A totally defeated, wicked king sees himself as an equal to Avraham not only militarily, but spiritually as well. After all (he is saying), I experienced a miracle too, just as great as yours. The self-deception of the king of Sodom, a city known as the center of extreme evil, is astounding. He actually claims spiritual equality. It would be hard to believe this if we wouldn't see it with our own eyes on a regular basis: People of no moral stature, people of corruption and selfish arrogance, claiming for themselves moral leadership and goodness.

The least we can learn from this is to aspire to be honest with ourselves in our own self-assessment. Only if we know who we are, warts and all, can we hope for meaningful and truthful moral growth and improvement.