



The Parsha of Lech Lecha is dedicated by Evonne and Jerry Marzouk in honor of the 35th wedding anniversary of Alfred and Vivianne Marzouk.

The Sefer of Bereishis is dedicated in memory of Jacob Cohen by Marilyn and Herbert Smilowitz and family.

Lech Lecha: Joining Together for Justice in the Land [\[1\]](#)
by Tuvia Aronson

In this week's Torah portion, Avram and Lot's inability to coexist on one piece of land leaps out at us. "And the land was unable to bear them to live together, because their possessions were great and they could not sit together" (Bereishit 13:6). In our era, when environmental issues such as population, food and land distribution are major concerns, we can look to this text for guidance.

The great commentator Rashi (France 1040-1105) [\[2\]](#) interprets the verse to mean that the land was simply unable to provide sufficient pasture for all the cattle and sheep involved. It is as if there is missing information intended to be inserted in the verse: "And the [pasture of the] land could not bear them."

An alternative approach is that of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany 1808-1888) and the "Netziv" (Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin -Russia 1817-1893). [\[3\]](#) It was not because they had too many herds or because there was not sufficient pastureland for both of them. If it all had been combined into one herd, one household, the land would have been sufficient...if two people cannot agree... separate tents are needed- boxes, crates, everything separate for each of the two parties....Had their personalities been compatible, there would have been no need for separate pastures...the only thing that counted in Lot's enterprise was profits, while in Avraham's household attention was given to interests of a higher level. [\[4\]](#)

According to this approach, Avram and Lot's attitudes were incompatible, therefore they could not co-operate. This is why the verse stresses "together"- yahdav. Interestingly, Targum Onkelos (2C) translates yahdav using the wording "as one," connoting the need for a deep interconnection that ultimately enables living in harmony with the Land [\[5\]](#). The Avrahamic tradition demands that we make our personal and societal decisions based on both environmental (the approach quoted by Rash"i) and social (the approach quoted by Rav Hirsch) considerations.

Lot followed Avram, but was not committed to the moral path. There is a textual nuance that proves this point. When Avram receives the command to immigrate to Canaan, the verse notes (12:4), " Lot went [et] him." Similarly, the Torah here (13:5) states that " Lot was going et [with] Avram." Rabbi Meir Leibush [\[6\]](#) (Malbim 1809-1879) explains that to go 'et' merely



implies a shared travel itinerary, while to go 'im' connotes a shared sense of purpose and mission.[\[7\]](#)

Viewing this story in its larger context can further illuminate this issue. Avraham[\[8\]](#) bequeathed to the Jewish people the concepts of Tzedek U-mishpat.[\[9\]](#) If the essence of societal flaws during the Mabul (flood) era is based upon moral corruption and selfish behavior, then the tikun (fixing) initiated by Avraham must at its very core focus on interpersonal relationships.

The sages explain the seemingly extra words in our verse “and the Canaanites dwelled in the land” as referring to an ethical debate about allowing flocks to eat from the fields of the locals.[\[10\]](#) Avraham’s commitment to justice was so strong that he could not stand living with Lot who could rationalize this form of theft[\[11\]](#), even from the most immoral of pagans. Avraham’s mission is to elevate the material world and create a dwelling space for the Divine. This can only be done when we act with deep care and concern for the other[\[12\]](#). This is in fact a classic case of Hilkhhot Yishuv HaAretz, the laws of settling the land of Israel [\[13\]](#): one is not to tend flocks in a way that damages the property of others.[\[14\]](#)

Avraham is decisive and resolute. He cannot make a treaty with Lot- he cannot share the Land of Israel with someone who condones theft and does not focus on the importance of other people. Unbalanced greed would later be a cause of the destruction of the Second Temple [\[15\]](#) and the subsequent exile from the land.[\[16\]](#) The Holy Temple in Jerusalem was to be a space devoted to the confluence of Bein Adam Lamakom (human-God) and Bein adam lehaveiro (inter-personal) values.[\[17\]](#) Avraham earns the right to the land of Israel through his ethical treatment of others in light of his monotheistic beliefs. He cannot jeopardize that bond with an alliance with Lot .[\[18\]](#)

In recent years we have seen an explosive trend in the growth of Jewish environmental groups and programs. Many of these programs see the coupling together of human co-operation with the environment as essential to their tasks. They teach that the way we treat each other is going to affect our ability to live in an ecologically sustainable way. Jewish environmental education programs stress Ahdut- togetherness.[\[19\]](#) Jewish community gardens are flourishing, [\[20\]](#) and consumer assisted farming[\[21\]](#) projects are enhancing Jewish life in ways that promote both communal unity and harmony with nature. Intentional Jewish ecological communities are gaining momentum. Concern for the environment crosses denominational and philosophical divides.[\[22\]](#)

Globally, environmental and human rights concerns have been increasingly linked in recent years. [\[23\]](#) The international community is gaining awareness of the issues relating to how we treat each other and the world we live in. In May of 1994, a United Nations group of experts on human rights gathered in Geneva and drafted the first-ever declaration of principles on human rights and the environment and proposed: “Human rights, an



ecologically sound environment, sustainable development and peace are interdependent and indivisible.”[24]

Despite this, the environmental situation, particularly in the land of Israel, desperately needs to progress faster. While efforts toward recycling and cleaning up the waters are making some progress,[25] we have a great deal of work ahead of us and we must unite in the effort. Jews worldwide need to be at the forefront of environmental and human rights concerns, if we are truly to be a “Light to the Nations.”[26]

In our generation, the Torah seems to be calling to the Jewish people: “Return to your roots and show the world a model Avraham would be proud of.” The Haftarah for our portion from Isaiah reflects the themes of “yahdav” (togetherness) and “tzedek” (justice) that we have discussed. It talks of how we must not be hopeless in the face of impending degradation. A more ideal way is expressed to give us hope. “Every Human will help their friend, to their brothers (and sisters) they will call out, ‘be strong’” (41:6). Working as one to take care of our precious resources is incredibly powerful. This is at the very core of our Jewish and environmental understanding. We must move towards living more harmoniously with the Earth by living more in unity with each other. Ultimately this will help us grow even closer to HaShem.

This is the legacy of Avraham.

Suggested Action Items:

- Look for an opportunity to share your resources with others. For example, take a book from your local library rather than buying a new one, create an opportunity to share tools with a neighbor, or organize a community swap for books, toys, or other products you can share.
- Learn about the environmental challenges faced in the land of Israel.
- Identify one place where you’d like to focus your attention on the state of the land. Then, follow the status of that place and do your part to help preserve it.
- Join together with other Jews to learn about the Torah wisdom on the environment.

Tuvia Aronson studied at Yeshivot Kerem BeYavne and Ma’aleh Adumim in Israel, as well as Yeshiva University, Glendon College and Wurzweiler School of Social Work. Before making Aliya in 2002, Tuvia co-founded the Jewish Nature Centre of Canada known as Torat HaTeva. In Israel, Tuvia served as a Judaica specialist, evaluating ancient Hebrew and Aramaic texts for online auctions, and as a teacher of Jewish history and the Land of Israel through tiyulim at the Alexander Muss High School. Tuvia is married to Panteha Haverim Aronson and they are blessed with a young son - Shalev Moshe Yashir Aronson.



[1] Dedicated to P.M.K.H.A

[2] Bereishit 13:6 – quoting Bereishit Rabbah 41. RaMBa"N (1194-1270) and Rabbi Ovadia of S'forno (1470 – 1550) also explain the verse in this manner.

[3] Haamek Davar on 13:6

[4] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch Commentary to Bereishit 13:6 Judaic Press: Edited by Efraim Oratz, translated by Gertrude Hirschler. This idea has a precedent in Pesikta Rabati 83- see footnote #17 in Rav Menachem M. Kasher's Torah Shleimah. See also Sifrei Ki Tezte 264 that sees conflict itself as the root cause of the separation. Also see Abravanel (, 1437-1508) who focuses on the Godly motives of Avram in contradistinction to Lot .

[5] Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12C) also translated yahdav as yahid- united, and not yahad-together.

[6] On Vayikra 19:13. Also see Vilna Gaon, Malbim, Haketav Vehakabalah on Bilam going "Imahem" or "Itam"

[7] Rabbi Eldad Zamir (ALEI ETZION Volume 10 / Tishrei 5761) examines Lot 's behavior in light of the model of his father who according to Midrash followed Avraham into the furnace out of selfish reasons rather than ideology.

[8] By this time his name had been changed - see Bereishit 17:5

[9] This is explicit in the text Bereishit 18:19. Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks explains how this pasuk is the foundation of a Jewish response to the problem of evil in a lecture: Judaism, Justice and Tragedy - Confronting the Problem of Evil - 6 November 2000, found on his website chiefrabbi.org. Also see Rabbi Menachem Leibtag on the contrast between Avraham and Sodom (where Lot chooses to reside) -tanach.org, parashat vayera.

[10] Canaanite worship also involved baby murder and public rapes in the name of their various gods. See Vayikra 18:3, Devarim 7:25-26. Visitors to Tel Gezer in central (near Karmeit Yosef) can see an example of Molech (child sacrifice) and the public rapes on behalf of the fertility gods (which shed light on the story of the revenge for the rape of Dina).

[11] The Jewish approach to ethics and economics is explored by Dr Meir Tamari in "With all your Possessions" (Free Press, 1987. He quotes Malbim on Shmot 20 who states that refraining from theft is an expression of faith in the Divine source of wealth. Our understanding of Avraham's piety is further strengthened by Bava Kama 23b, in which Abaye is sent by Rav Yosef to rebuke shepherds for letting their goats graze in his fields. Abaye responds that the shepherds will claim that Rav Yosef should have built a fence if he wanted to protect his fields. There are authorities who uphold Abaye's argument as halacha (see Rach, Bava Kama ibid). Although Lot has a halakhically plausible argument, Avraham cannot tolerate even the dust of theft.

[12] Rav David Zeller z.l. illustrates this beautifully in "The Soul of the Story" (Jewish Lights, 2006). Please see the story of his meeting with Nakazono Sensei, a Shinto Priest.

[13] See: Mishna Tamid 2:3; Bava Kama, 79b and Rashi; Rambam, "Laws of Things Banned from the Altar," Mishneh Torah, 7:3; Encyclopedia Talmudit 2:225-26. Note that the Tur uses the term yishuv ha-o'lam (settlement of the world) instead of yishuv ha-aretz (settling the land of Israel), extending the halakha of balancing financial concerns with environmental and social factors to all lands. Jonathan Helfand in Judaism and Environmental Ethics, (pp.



38 – 52) quotes Rav Yaakov of Emden who applied the concept of yishuv ha-aretz to a situation arising in .

[14] For modern relevance of this halakha, see Har Zvi of Rav Zvi Pesach Frank and Rav Kook as quoted in the Birur Halakhah Gemara.

[15] Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma, 1:1

[16] . Semag, Rabbi Moshe of Coucy (Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Hilkhoh Hashavat Aveidah) explains that the present exile continues so long only because of our unethical business practices (Quoted by Dr Meir Tamari). Similarly in Bamidbar Rabba (22:7) we find: "The sons of Gad and Reuven were rich and had large flocks. They loved their money and lived outside the Holy Land and therefore they were exiled before all the other tribes...What was the cause of this? They separated themselves from their brothers because of their possessions." For a deeper analysis of this connection between Lot and the hurban see: Tish'ah b'Av and the Children of Lot By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom.

[17] For a Hasidic (Breslov) approach to the Avot and the Temple as paradigms of global balance, please see Rav Avraham Greenbaum: <http://www.azamra.org/earth.shtml>

[18] In fact, the very next text (13:14) proves this point- the Torah stresses that the Divine promise of the Land as a gift to Avraham and his children came only after Lot had left.

[19] In the , Shomrai Adamah and The Teva Learning Center have been at the forefront of this movement. The Teva Earth Education model has been articulated by Adam Berman, Nili Simhai, and Noam Dolgin. Groups in include among others: Arava Institute on Kibutz Ketura, Derech HaTeva of SPNI, Hava VeAdam near Modiin, Shomera in the Jerusalem forest, the Yeshiva Tichonit Sevivatit in Mitzpe Ramon, The Eco Beit Midrash at Yeshivat Simchat Shlomo etc.

[20] ADAMAH, Alexandra Kuperman, Farmer D etc.

[21] Hazon, Hava VeAdam, Torat Hateva etc.

[22] COEJL, Canfei Nesharim etc.

[23] E.g.: The poorest human populations will be hardest hit by global climate crisis. Also, a very poignant description about one such scenario was reported in National Geographic's February 2007 issue by Tom O'Neill. "Oil fouls everything in southern . It spills from the pipelines, poisoning soil and water. It stains the hands of politicians and generals, who siphon off its profits. It taints the ambitions of the young, who will try anything to scoop up a share of the liquid riches—fire a gun, sabotage a pipeline, kidnap a foreigner."

[24] Draft Principles On Human Rights And The Environment, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/9, Annex I (1994). Part I, section 1 - i.e. the very first point in their declaration (after the preamble)

[25] Thanks to efforts by Adam Teva VaDin, Zalul, Megama Yeruka, Atid Yarok among many others.

[26] Isaiah 42:6