



Unfulfilled Promises

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Parashat Hayyei Sarah 5785

At the end of this week's *parashah*, Avraham—who has been promised time and time again ownership over all the land of Canaan—owns nothing but a grave.

When we read Avraham's journey carefully, this ending may not surprise us. From the very beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha, Avraham's life is marked by fantastic, unbelievable promises, shortly followed by obstacles that make their fulfillment seem impossible. Told by God to leave his home behind, Avraham arrives in Canaan, where God gives him the first promise: Your children—the children who don't exist yet—will inherit this land. Avraham sacrifices to God in gratitude—and then, almost immediately, the dream turns to ashes. There is a famine in the land—the land that God just promised to Avraham's descendants—a famine so devastating that Avraham and his family, newly arrived, go to Egypt in order to survive.

When Avraham finally returns to the land, disaster strikes again. Newly wealthy, Avraham and his nephew Lot, his presumptive heir, find they can no longer live together.

בראשית יג:

וַיְהִי רִיב בֵּין רֵעֵי מִקְנֵה אַבְרָם וּבֵין רֵעֵי מִקְנֵה לוֹט וְהַכְנַעְנִי וְהַפְרָזִי אֲזַיָּשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ:



Bereishit 13:7

There was quarreling between the herders of Abram's cattle and those of Lot's cattle. The Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land.

Rashi, noticing the verse's seemingly unconnected ending, "The Canaanites and Perizzites were then dwelling in the land," suggests that there was a values clash between Avraham and Lot about how to understand who the land currently belongs to:

רש"י בראשית יג:

"ויהי ריב" לפי שהיו רועים של לוט רשעים ומרעים בהמתם בשדות אחרים, ורועי אברם מוכיחים אותם על הגזל, והם אומרים נתנה הארץ לאברם, ולו אין יורש, ולוט יורשו, ואין זה גזל, והכתוב אומר והכנעני והפרזי אז יושב בארץ, ולא זכה בה אברם עדיו:

Rashi on Bereishit 13:7

"There was quarreling" because Lot's shepherds were wicked and grazed their animals in other people's fields and Avram's rebuked them for the theft. But they said, "The land is given to Avram, and he has no heir [so] Lot will inherit him, [therefore] there is no theft!" But the verse says, "The Canaanites and the Perizzites were then dwelling in the land," and Avram had not yet acquired it.

Knowing that God promised this land to Avraham, and that Lot is Avraham's only heir, Lot's shepherds treated the land as if it were their own. Avraham's shepherds, on the other hand, restricted their sheep. While Avraham believed in the promise, he knew that it was not yet fulfilled, and that the land was not yet his.

Rashi's explanation of this disagreement between Avraham and Lot points to a fundamental difference between them: the ability—or the lack of ability—to live in the space of unfulfilled promise. Lot believes entirely in God's promise, and, following that belief, treats the promise



as if it must already be true. He sees God's word as a binary: the promise is true, or it is not. If it is true, it must be true now—and if not, it makes sense to abandon the promise entirely, remove himself from Avraham and Avraham's God, and go somewhere else to make his fortune. Lot cannot live in the in-between. He cannot tolerate the waiting. He does not have the ability to trust in an unfulfilled promise—and so he leaves.

It is this fundamental difference between Lot and Avraham that allows us to read Avraham's purchase of Me'arat ha-Mahpelah, the cave where he buried Sarah, not as a moment of tragedy but as one of faith. Me'arat ha-Mahpelah is, in many ways, a symbol of what it means to live in the space of unfulfilled promises. It is the first place in Canaan that Avraham can truly lay claim to—but its very purchase acknowledges just how much of the promise is as-yet unfulfilled. Avraham is not the triumphant, sole possessor of the land. Unlike Lot's shepherds who we imagine might charge in, demanding that the inhabitants give him his choice of graves (or at least accept their initial offer to do so), Avraham acts with humility, accepting reality as it is in the moment:

בראשית כג:יב-יג

¹²וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַבְרָהָם לִפְנֵי עַם הָאָרֶץ: ¹³וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-עֶפְרוֹן בְּאָזְנֵי עַם הָאָרֶץ לֵאמֹר אֲךָ אִם-אַתָּה לֹו שְׂמָעֲנִי נָתַתִּי כֶסֶף הַשְּׂדֶה קֹחַ מִמֶּנִּי וְאֶקְבְּרָה אֶת מֵתִי שָׁמָּה:

Bereishit 23:12-13

¹²Then Avraham bowed low before the landowning citizens, ¹³and spoke to Efron in the hearing of the landowning citizens, saying, "If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there."

Avraham believes in the promise of the land. But he also knows that that promise has not yet reached its culmination. In purchasing the cave where he will one day be buried with Sarah, he acknowledges both that he believes that the promise will one day be true, that his



descendants will possess the land that houses the very bones of their ancestors, and that he will die without seeing that day.

To Lot's shepherds—desperate for the immediate fulfillment of promises, impatient with half-measures—Avraham's situation in Hayyei Sarah might seem like a defeat. But there is a spiritual heroism in what Avraham does when he humbly purchases Sarah's grave. While Avraham leaves Me'arat ha-Maḥpelah as a physical legacy to his children, its purchase carries another legacy alongside it: the ability to believe in the promise completely, with a full heart, while also acknowledging the reality that it is not yet complete. In refusing either to deny the promise or reality, Avraham teaches his descendants how to walk the narrow path that combines faith with a refusal to deny the reality of the world as it is, or to trample over others in our haste to bring the world that we believe will one day be.

We live in a world where the gap between the world we see and the world our religion and values promise us is sometimes too much to bear. And sometimes, like Lot, it is tempting to throw up our hands and despair; if this world, after all this time, does not look anything like the world the promise demands, then maybe it is time to abandon that promise. It is equally tempting, at other times, to act as Lot did before the parting: to pretend that the world is already where it needs to be, that the promise has already been fulfilled. Both of these approaches abandon hope, one by declaring that there is no point in hoping for something better, and the other by declaring that this is the best anyone reasonably could possibly hope for.

Unfulfilled promises, painful as they are at times, are what allow us to work towards the ideal. They are what allow us to admit the reality of the world as it is—with all its flaws—because they give us the belief in something better. They give us the strength to live our lives as links



in a chain, knowing that while any individual link may not live to see redemption, the chain as a whole surely will.