

## Parshat Lech Lecha Relativism vs. Benchmarking

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Human nature is to always look for a way to understand one's personal standing. Seemingly, the best way to do this is to benchmark oneself against objective standards. Aside from the issues of how to and who should set such standards, the deficit with such a method is how does one know that the standard of measurement is fair. In order to avoid this pitfall, the person often looks at their relative ranking versus others who have undertaken a similar task. For instance, when one takes a test, they many times receive an absolute score as well as a percentile ranking of their result compared to the others taking the same test. The problem with this approach is that it ignores the unique aspects of any given individual. While this does highlight the aptitude, competence or proficiency of an individual at a particular task, it still does not address whether the person is fulfilling their potential. If one is gifted in a certain realm, then comparing that person to an objective standard or relative to others may overstate their standing versus their capabilities and vice versa someone who is challenged in a particular area then their ranking against an objective level or others may very well understate their realization of their potential. To say that a prodigy in music or a talented athlete is ranked very highly relative to others or a given standard is meaningless with regards to what their ultimate capabilities are and what they could possibly eventually accomplish. In addition, the subset against which one is compared will be heavily influential in determining the relative standing of that individual. If the right subset is chosen, then the relative results will be a more meaningful representation of that individual. On the other hand, if too broad or too small a pool of comparison is utilized, it will dilute the meaning of the relative benchmarking. Even when the seemingly correct subset is chosen, there is a risk that the use of a narrower comparison, without giving context to the greater pool of individuals out there, might stunt the growth of

that particular individual who thinks they have reached the pinnacle of their environment. Namely, a student who is smug about being at the top of their class, might be shocked to find that their standing when compared to a broader selection is mediocre. What is true with regards to knowledge and prowess in the intellectual and physical world is even more pronounced in the areas of human character and behavior and the religious realm.

Chazal encourage looking to others for inspiration and growth, but are keenly aware that such relativism can lead to negative repercussions. Rabbi Matya ben Charash, in the Mishna in Avot, advises that it is better to be a "tail to the lions than a head to the foxes."<sup>1</sup> Being amongst those that are wiser, greater and possessing better character than the individual will encourage and cause one to rise to greater heights. On the other hand, leading those that lack those qualities will over time engender the person to gravitate towards those that are beneath them. Many of the commentators illustrate this by the fact that the lowest ranked member of the High Court is still considered to be classified higher than the leading figures of the regional courts.<sup>2</sup> Figuratively, this is indicated by the fact that the lion is apt to move its tail towards its head whereas the fox regularly turns its head toward its tail.<sup>3</sup> Meaning, that those that look upwards tend to rise while those that look downwards tend to fall. That is why many teachers, rabbis and community leaders have others that they look up to in order to inspire them so that they don't become complacent in their positions of leadership.

The Rambam codifies this principle in his codex of law, Mishne Torah, where he writes, "It is a natural proclivity of man to be influenced in his ideas and conduct by his friends and associates, and to follow the tendencies of the people where he resides. Therefore, it is necessary for man to be in the company of the righteous, and to sit near the wise, in order to learn from their conduct, and to distance himself from the evil-doers who follow the path of darkness, in order not to learn from their conduct..."<sup>4</sup> A great

<sup>1</sup> רבי ינאי אומר אין בידיו לא משלות הרשעים ואף לא מיסורי הצדיקים רבי מתיא בן חרש אומר הוי מקדים בשלום כל אדם והוי זנב לאריות ואל תהי ראש לשועלים: (אבות ד, טו)

<sup>2</sup> ואל תהי ראש לשועלים - לומר לך שנוח לו לאדם להיות תלמיד למי שגדול ממנו בחכמה. שנמצא בכל יום מוסיף על חכמתו מהיותו רב למי שקטון ממנו בחכמה. שנמצא פוחת והולך מחכמתו כענין שאמרנו מי שהיה ראש לסנהדרה קטנה עושין אות' טפלה לסנהדרה גדולה. (רבינו יונה אבות ד, טו)

<sup>3</sup> אמרו הוי זנב לאריות ואל תהי ראש לשועלים, כי זנב ארי ארי. ועוד כי טבע זנב הארי להתעקם נגד הראש, רמז אל המשתדל ומתדבק בעפר רגלי הנכבדים יהיה נכבד ומעולה. ואל תהי ראש לשועלים כי ראש שועל שועל. ועוד כי טבע השועל לעקם ראשו תמיד אל זנבו, לרמז כי המתחבר אל השפלים ימשך לו שפלות במדותיו ובדעותיו ובהנהגותיו. (רבי מתתיה היצהרי אבות ד, טו)

<sup>4</sup> דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחבריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו, לפיכך צריך אדם להתחבר לצדיקים ולישב אצל החכמים תמיד כדי שילמוד ממעשיהם, ויתרחק מן הרשעים ההולכים בחשך כדי שלא ילמוד ממעשיהם,

illustration of this is in the number of children that couples feel comfortable raising. Even if one believes that they want to bring up more or less than the average number of children, they are still guided by the average number of children in their environs. On a personal note, I will never forget when we once hosted a guest from Israel in our house for Shabbat. At the Shabbat table, he politely inquired as to how many children God had blessed us with. Our response, which we proudly considered to be a not so insignificant number, drew the following retort, "that is a nice start." Deflated and shocked, my wife and I soon found out that the average number of children in his neighborhood was twelve. At the same time, when coworkers inquired as to how many children we had, it usually resulted in the response, "are you crazy, what were you thinking, have you never heard of birth control?" Sublimely, the number of children one considers raising is heavily influenced by one's location, friends and acquaintances. That is equally, if not more so, true with regards to the priorities one sets in their lives, the behaviors one considers acceptable, the attitudes that one entertains and even the way one dresses. Where one lives and the company they keep will be highly influential in the type of person that they are and the life that they lead. While in rare cases adversity might help to define the individual and strengthen their resolve and beliefs, over the long run their success in personal and religious growth will always be tethered by the environment and company they keep. That is why those that are involved in the noble work of leading or forming communities away from traditional Jewish centers need to always have their own leaders and friends outside of such a location that can help them to set higher benchmarks and to be a reality check as to what is objectively acceptable in order to not them fall prey to the contentment of their relative standing in such a community. This might be one of the reasons that the Torah demands that one ascend to Yerushalayim at least three times a year (עלייה לרגל) in order to

appear before God. That experience of being before God and being amongst the great leaders of Bnei Yisrael helps to shake one out of their relative complacency. The inspiration engendered will hopefully encourage them to reestablish their objective standards and to recognize their relative standing in a much larger context.

Chazal also saw competition and relative ranking as a means to better the individual. The Gemara in Bava Batra encourages multiple teachers to set up shop in close proximity because of the principle that "jealousy among teachers increases wisdom (קנאת סופרים תרבה) (חכמה)." <sup>5</sup> Based on that same concept, the Gemara allows one to replace a teacher with a better teacher because the new teacher will be more fastidious in his profession knowing that the one he replaced is seeking to win back his old position. <sup>6</sup> While gauging oneself relative to others can be a productive and positive force for growth and change, Chazal also recognized that jealousy could be a pernicious and destructive force. The last of the Ten Commandments decries allowing oneself to be jealous of others and their possessions. Rabbi Eliezer HaKapar, in the Mishna in Avot, sums it up succinctly, "envy, lust and the desire for honor put a man out of the world (הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד מוציאין את האדם מן העולם)." <sup>7</sup> In summary, measuring oneself against others has its place when it acts as a motivating force for improvement, but one has to be aware that it also has the danger of allowing for complacency and recidivism.

In this week's Parsha, as a result of the quarrel between the shepherds of Lot and Avram, Lot takes leave of Avram and settles in the fertile Jordan River plain in proximity to the cities of S'dom, Amora, Adma, Tzvo'im and Tzo'ar. Lot's relative position improves significantly with the move, as is indicated in next week's Parsha. He goes from being the protégé of Avram to sitting in the gateway to the city of Sdom, an indication that he held a position of prominence. <sup>8</sup> Lot also

<sup>5</sup> הוא ששלמה אומר הולך את חכמים יחכם ורועה כסילים ירוע, ואומר אשרי האיש וגו', וכן אם היה במדינה שמנהגותיה רעים ואין אנשיה הולכים בדרך ישרה ילך למקום שאנשיה צדיקים ונוהגים בדרך טובים, ואם היו כל המדינות שהוא יודעם ושומע שמועתן נוהגים בדרך לא טובה כמו זמנינו, או שאינו יכול ללכת למדינה שמנהגותיה טובים מפני הגייסות או מפני החולי ישב לבדו יחידי כענין שנאמר ישב בדרך יודים, ואם היו רעים וחטאים שאין מניחים אותו לישב במדינה אלא אם כן נתערב עמהו ונוהג במנהגם הרע יצא למערות ולחוחים ולמדברות, ואל ינהיג עצמו בדרך חטאים כענין שנאמר מי יתני במדבר מלון אורחים. (רמב"ם הלכות דעות ו,א)

<sup>6</sup> אמר רב יוסף: ומודי רב הונא במקרי דדקי דלא מצי מעכב, דאמר מר: (עזרא תיקון להן לישראל שיהו מושיבין סופר בצד סופר. וניחוש דילמא אתי לאיתרשולי. א"ל: קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה. (בבא בתרא כא.)

<sup>6</sup> ואמר רבא: האי מקרי ינוקי דגריס, ואיכא אחרינא דגריס טפי מיניה - לא מסלקין ליה, דלמא אתי לאיתרשולי. רב דימי מנהרדעא אמר: כ"ש דגריס טפי, קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה. (בבא בתרא כא.)

<sup>7</sup> רבי אליעזר הקפר אומר הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד מוציאין את האדם מן העולם: (אבות ד, כא.)

<sup>8</sup> ולוט יושב, ישב כתיב אותו היום מינוהו ארכי דיינים (בראשית רבה נג, ג) \\ ולוט ישב בשער סדום - ישב כתיב אותו היום<sup>2</sup> מינוהו שופט<sup>3</sup> עליהם: (רש"י בראשית יט, א) \\ ישב בשער סדום - אין "ישיבה בשער" להדידות; רק מלכים היו "יושבים בשער" (שמואל ב' יט, ט; ירמיה לח, ז); או כדוגמת בועז (רות ד, א) - אישים העוסקים בעניין צבורי רשמי. גם אין לומר כי לוט היה גר בשער, שאם כן היה אומר: "בחומה", כדרך שמצינו ברחב (יהושע ב, טו). ביטוי זה מציין איפוא, כדעת חז"ל (בראשית רבה נ, ו), משרה צבורית גבוהה, שלוט שימש בה בעירו: (רש"י הירש בראשית יט, א)



integrity in the face of such degeneracy is an indication of his stellar character which would have only been enhanced in a more conducive environment. It is similar to a flask of perfume which diffuses a pleasing fragrance despite the unpleasant ambient odors, but its fragrance would be even more notable in a pleasant environment.

As noted above, relative comparisons can be used as a tool to better oneself, but the risks run high that such thinking will result in one utilizing it as a weapon to defend one's indiscretions. The Gemara in Arachin<sup>21</sup> quotes Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya as saying that the art of rebuke has been lost (תמיהני אם יש בדור הזה שידוע להוכיח) as people lack the nuance and finesse to admonish without causing the recipient embarrassment.<sup>22</sup> More damning is the view of Rabbi Tarfon who suggests that the ability to receive reproach has been lost (תמה אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה). That is because the one being castigated responds to the scolder, "before you remove the splinter from between my eyes, why don't you eliminate the beam that is between your eyes." In other words, who are you to render reproof to me for a minor infraction when you are guilty of much more severe transgressions? The response is interesting since the person being admonished never addresses their impropriety. They simply justify their indiscretion by pointing to the fact that they are "better" than the one reprimanding them and therefore no corrective action is required. This attitude is likely the reason that Lashon HaRa is so "popular." It allows the one conveying the deprecating information about their friend to not have to make any changes in their behavior. By simply raising one's relative standing vis-à-vis others, they can justify their continued misconduct or relieve themselves of the necessity to grow or improve their ways.

This type of misconception is also found in this week's Parsha. When the Four Kings attack the Five Kings, Avraham rushes to the rescue of the defeated Five Kings in order to save his nephew Lot. In the story, the Five Kings seem to be the innocent victims of the powerful and bullying Four Kings. The sympathy of the reader is drawn to their plight and this is reinforced by the

fact that the hero of the story, Avraham, sides with the Five Kings. Their salvation might have led them to erroneously believe that in relation to the Four Kings, the cities of S'dom, Amora, Adma, Tzvo'im and Tzo'ar were not so bad. Lest you come to such a mistaken conclusion, the Torah is unequivocal in its perspective on S'dom V'Amora when they are introduced as the residential choice of Lot. "The inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against God (רעים וְחַטָּאִים לִיקָוֶה מְאֹד)."<sup>23</sup> The travails they underwent in being defeated and then rescued did not cause them to introspect, but rather strengthened their resolve in their ways because they looked at the Four Kings and decided that they were not so bad. That complacency born of relativism led to their ultimate demise because they never reflected on their own evil ways, but simply utilized their comparative standing to justify their continued immorality and cruelty. This is likely one of the main reasons why Avraham eschews taking any compensation from the king of S'dom. If he accepted their offer of taking the spoils, it might have given the impression that he was giving his stamp of approval to their way of life and that they deserved his help. By foregoing any compensation, he makes it clear that his intervention and the benefit that accrued to them was solely to save his nephew Lot. If they wanted to be a real partner with Avraham, they would have to change their ways and not just pat themselves on the back for being better than the Four Kings.

At the end of Sefer Shoftim, there are two stories of a similar ilk – Pesel Micha<sup>24</sup> and Pilegish BaGiva.<sup>25</sup> Pilegish BaGiva describes the civil war that ensues between the tribe of Binyamin and the remainder of Bnei Yisrael. Bnei Yisrael gather against the tribe of Binyamin in order to avenge the gang-rape of a visitor's concubine perpetrated by low-lives from Binyamin who have yet to be brought to justice by their own tribe. In order to protect its sovereignty, the tribe of Binyamin refuses to disgorge the criminals that they had failed to prosecute. The Ramban in his commentary to Parshat Vayera notes some of the similarities and differences between S'dom and Pilegish BaGiva.<sup>26</sup> One of the key points he makes is that the civil war that erupts

<sup>21</sup> תניא, א"ר טרפון: תמה אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה, אם אמר לו טול קיסם מבין עיניך, אמר לו טול קורה מבין עיניך. אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: תמיהני אם יש בדור הזה שידוע להוכיח. (ערכין טז):

<sup>22</sup> שידוע להוכיח - דרך כבוד שלא יהו פניו משתנין. (רש"י ערכין טז):

<sup>23</sup> וְאֵנְשֵׁי סְדֹם וְרָעִים וְחַטָּאִים לִיקָוֶה מְאֹד: (בראשית י"ג)

<sup>24</sup> ספר שופטים פרקים יז-יח

<sup>25</sup> ספר שופטים פרקים יט-כא

<sup>26</sup> ...ודע והבן כי ענין פילגש בגבעה (שופטים יט) אף על פי שהוא נדמה לענין הזה אינו כמוהו לרוע, כי הרשעים ההם לא היה דעתם לכלול הרגל ממקומם, אבל היו שטופי זמה ורצו גם במשכב האישי האורח, וכאשר הוציאו אליהם פילגשו נתפייסו בה. והאיש

between Binyamin and the rest of Bnei Yisrael has no party who is in the right.<sup>27</sup> They each justify their stance vis-à-vis each other, but neither side takes reckoning of their own misdeeds or improper behavior. Bnei Yisrael act zealously and extrajudicially with regards to others' misdeeds, but overlook their own indiscretions including turning a blind eye to the public and popular idolatrous practices associated with Micha's idol. At the same time, Shevet Binyamin effectively provides sanctuary to their tribe's criminals under the guise of maintaining independence because they believed that the implicated criminals were not deserving of the death penalty. Both parties rest on the laurels of their relative righteousness, thereby leaving no party with the moral high ground or justification for their taking up arms. This leads to a situation in which God causes both sides to suffer terrible losses.<sup>28</sup>

In the story of Pesel Micha, a part of the tribe of Dan travels north to relocate to a more hospitable environment (Tel Dan) due to the trouble they encounter with conquering and settling the land allocated to them by Yehoshua in the division of Eretz Yisrael. On their way north, following the same path as the expeditionary force they had sent to scout out this alternative inheritance, they pass by the residence of Micha which is a house of idol worship (Pesel Micha). The scouts had stopped there on their original mission and had received a blessing of success from the resident priest. On their relocation trip, they once again pass the house of Micha, only this time they decide to abscond with the idol and priest formed, anointed and financed by Micha. They intend to use these items to set up a local temple once they settle in their new location. Micha gives chase to the thieves, but is turned back by the group heading north who sport an intimidating

force of six hundred armed men. They tell Micha not to "...do any shouting at us, since it might cause some desperate and angry men to attack you, and you and your family would lose their lives. So Micha, realizing that they were stronger than he, turned back and went home..."<sup>29</sup> One feels bad for the bullied Micha until they recall that he was hosting and promulgating idol worship which he had financed with money he had stolen from his mother.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the idol worshipping marauders stole from the idol hosting thief.

Both of the stories at the end of Sefer Shoftim involve parties who are problematic. The narrative steers one's sympathy to one party or the other, but in the end they are all troublesome and their better standing is only in relative terms to the evil being perpetrated against them. For that reason, they all suffer negative consequences.

Looking to others for inspiration and motivation is commendable. When utilized properly and positively, it is the most basic and fundamental method by which one achieves growth. On the other hand, taking solace in the misdeeds of others is a losing proposition. That is because relativism can only provide a short term respite from reckoning, but it is not a long term plan. The only solution to one's own shortcomings is mending one's ways, not trying to find someone else who has more or other deficits to justify one's smugness. This week's Parsha reminds us of the dangers of relying on this relative rationalization. It hurts our ability to take corrective action and makes us miss the warning signs that could help us to avert much worse outcomes.

Shabbat Shalom

הזקן שאמר להם הנה בתי הבתולה ופילגשו אוציאה נא אותם ועשו להם הטוב בעיניכם (שם י"ט כד), יודע היה שלא יחפצו בבתו ולא יעשו עמה רעה, ועל כן לא אבו לשמוע לו, וכאשר הוציא את פילגשו לבדה שתקו ממנו. והאיש בעל הבית גם האורח כולם היו חפצים להציל את האיש בפילגשו, כי פילגש היתה לא אשת איש, וכבר זנתה עליו... (רמב"ן בראשית י"ט, ח)

27... ולפי דעות שזה ענשם של ישראל להגנף בתחילה, מפני שלא היתה המלחמה נעשית מן הדין, והגדר עצמו על שבת בנימין היה מוטל לעשותו, ולא עליהם, שמצוה על השבט לדון את שבטו (ספרי קמד): והנה שתי הכתות ראויות להענש, כי בנימין מרשיע שאינו חושש ליסור הרעים ולא לגעור בהם כלל, וישראל עושים מלחמה שלא מן הדין, וגם את פי ה' לא שאלו בזה... (רמב"ן בראשית י"ט, ח) \\\ וזה גם נכון לגבי השחקנים - האיש הלוי ולא פתח לה דלת הבית עד אור הבקר ואח"כ נתח אותה לנתחים כדי לשלוח חלק ממנה לכל השבטים לזעזע אותם במה שקרה

28 והנה היו שבטי הימים המתים מישראל ארבעים אלף, ומבנימין נפלו בסוף כ"ה אלפים אנשי חיל (שופטים כ לה), ומעיר מתום עד כל הנמצא (שם כ מח), רבים. ויתכן שיהיו ט"ו אלפים בין אנשים ונשים והטף, והיה עונש שתי הכתות בשוה: ומה נכבדו דברי רבותינו (סנהדרין קג ב) שהיה הקצף בפסלו של מיכה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא בכבודי

לא מחיתם, בכבוד בשר ודם מחיתם. לומר, בכבודי לא מחיתם במחוייבי מיתה ופושטים ידיהם בעיקר, בכבוד בשר ודם מחיתם יותר משורת הדין. ועל כן כיל עצת שתי הכתות ואמץ את לבבם ולא זכרו ברית אחים: (רמב"ן בראשית י"ט, ח)

29 הַמָּה הַרְחִיקוּ מִבֵּית מִיכָה וְהַאֲנִשִּׁים אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵתֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר עִם־בֵּית מִיכָה נָזְעְקוּ וַיִּדְבְּקוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי־דָן: וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי־דָן וַיִּסְבוּ פְנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְמִיכָה מַה־לָּךְ כִּי נִזְעַקְתָּ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי לְקַחְתֶּם וְאֶת־הַכֶּהֱן וַתִּלְכּוּ וּמַה־לִּי עוֹד וּמַה־זֶּה תֹאמְרוּ אֵלַי מַה־לָּךְ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי־דָן אֵלֵינוּ תִשְׁמַע קוֹלְךָ עִמָּנוּ כִּי־פָגַעוּ בְלָם אֲנָשִׁים מֵרֵי לָפֶסֶת וְאֶסְפְּתָה נַפְשָׁה וְנִגַּשׁ בֵּיתְךָ: וַיִּלְכוּ בְנֵי־דָן לְדַרְגָם וַיִּרְאוּ מִיכָה כִּי־חִזְקִים הָמָּה מִמֶּנּוּ וַיִּפְּן וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ (שופטים יח, כב-כו)

30 וַיְהִי־אִישׁ מִהַר־אֶפְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁמוּ מִיכָהוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר לְאִמּוֹ אֵלֶּךָ וּמַה־הַפֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְתָּ לָּךְ וְאֵת אֵלֶיךָ וְגַם אֶמְרַת בְּאֲזְנֵי הַגֵּה־הַפֶּסֶף אֵתִי אֲנִי לְקַחְתִּיו וַתֹּאמֶר אִמּוֹ בְרוּךְ בְּנֵי לֵיקוּק: וַיָּשָׁב אֶת־אֵלֶּךָ וּמַה־הַפֶּסֶף לְאִמּוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר אִמּוֹ הַקֹּדֶשׁ הַקֹּדֶשׁ אֶת־הַפֶּסֶף לֵיקוּק מִיָּדִי לְבָנִי לְעֹשׂוֹת פֶּסֶל וּמִסְכָּה וְעַתָּה אֲשִׁיבֶנּוּ לָךְ: וַיָּשָׁב אֶת־הַפֶּסֶף לְאִמּוֹ וַתִּקַּח אִמּוֹ מֵאֵתֵיהֶם פֶּסֶף וַתִּתְּנֶהוּ לְצֹרֶף וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ פֶסֶל וּמִסְכָּה וַיְהִי בְּבֵית מִיכָה לִּזְבֹּחַ אֱלֹהִים וַיַּעֲשֶׂ אֶפְדֹּד וַתִּרְפֵּי וַיִּמְלֵא אֶת־יָדֵי אֶחָד מִבָּנָיו וַיְהִי־לוֹ לְכֹהֵן: בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אִין מִלָּךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיִּשָּׂר בְּעֵינָיו וַיַּעֲשֶׂה: (שופטים יז, א-ז)