



Sevara

Torah, reasoned.

Parashat Lech Lecha

Genesis 12:1 – 17:27 · 4 divrei Torah

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Finding Our Bearings

In brief: Why is “left” sometimes north in the Bible? Why did Jabotinsky call Transjordan the “left”? And what does the Temple rule mean, “all the turns you make should only be to the right”? A journey through directions, maps, clocks and circuits.

Two ways to give directions

There are two ways to describe a direction: relative to the body (right and left, forward and back), or relative to the world (north and south, east and west). In daily life we switch between them. We don’t tell a lost driver “turn south,” but “the second right.” But right and left are confusing when it isn’t clear which way the speaker is facing. When Abraham told Lot, “if you go left, I will go right,” had they been facing each other, one man’s right would have been the other’s left.

Right is south

But Abraham may not have meant our right and left. In biblical times, right and left also served as names for the compass points, on the assumption that a person stands facing east. “Kedem,” the front, is east; right is south; and left is north. This is how Onkelos translates: “If you go north, I will go south.” So too “Hobah, which is to the left of Damascus” lies north of Damascus, and “the hinder sea” is the Mediterranean, in the west.

Why face east? Perhaps because of the rising sun. As Nachmanides writes (Exodus 26:18), the language names the directions “after a person facing the light of the sun.”

East on top

On ancient maps, too, east was at the top. On the Madaba Map, an ancient mosaic map found in Jordan, the Dead Sea is drawn above Jerusalem. Hence the word “orientation”: whoever held a map had to “orient” himself, that is, turn toward the Orient.



The Madaba Map: the Dead Sea, with its boats, is drawn above Jerusalem (bottom left).

At the end of the Middle Ages this changed. The sun rises further north or south depending on the season, while the North Star is far more precise. When ships began sailing long distances, north moved to the top of the map. Today north and south are “up and down”: in Hebrew, one “goes up” to the Golan and “goes down” to the Negev.

Southward with Jabotinsky

An amusing exception: Jabotinsky’s poem “The Left Bank of the Jordan.” The British Mandate originally included today’s Jordan as well, but Churchill divided it and gave Transjordan to Abdullah. Jabotinsky saw this as theft, and wrote: “Let my treacherous right hand forget, if I forget the left bank of the Jordan.”

Why is Transjordan on the “left”? Because Jabotinsky wrote the poem in Paris. The city is divided into the Left Bank and the Right Bank of the Seine, according to the direction of the river’s flow. So he too stood facing the flow of the Jordan, southward, and Transjordan came out on the left.



The territory of the British Mandate: the Land of Israel and Transjordan (labels in Hebrew).

Between time and space

“Reuven runs before Shimon” means that Shimon is facing Reuven. But “ten before noon” means that noon faces the past and has its back to the future. Why? We feel the future is in our hands, so we face it. In the past, the future was seen as unknown, “behind our back,” and people faced the past, which they could “see.” So in tractate Chagigah (16a): the Mishnah forbids inquiring into “what is in front and what is behind,” and the Gemara asks: “In front – what has been has been?” In other words, “in front” is the past.

Why do clocks go “clockwise”?

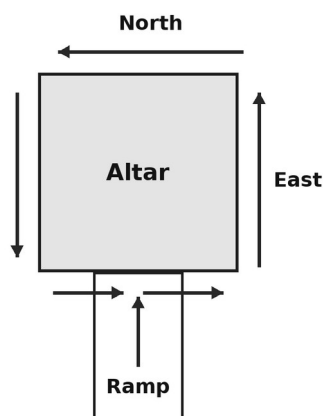
Because of the sundial. Its shadow falls to the west in the morning, to the north at noon and to the east in the evening, and mechanical clocks copied this motion. An exception: at the Altneuschul synagogue in Prague, the Hebrew clock runs backward. Whoever built it assumed that if Jews write from right to left, their clock should run backward too.



The clock that runs counterclockwise at the Altneuschul synagogue in Prague. Photo courtesy of Ariel Monseliza, Ra'anana.

“All the turns you make should only be to the right”

The Kohanim went up to the altar by the kevesh, the ramp leading up to it, facing north. According to the law (Maimonides, Laws of Sacrificial Procedure 7:11), “they go up by the right and walk around.” But this is puzzling: after one turn to the right, it takes three turns to the left to go around the altar!



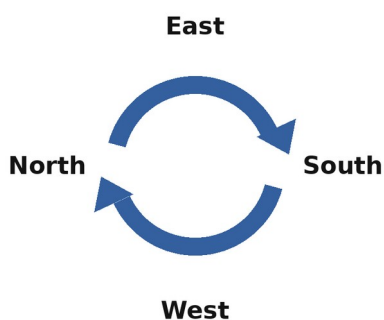
Going up to the altar: up the ramp facing north, then turning right.

The Gemara (Zevachim 62b) brings proof from Solomon’s “sea,” a great basin resting on twelve sculpted oxen: “three facing north, three facing west, three facing south and three facing east.” But for someone facing north, the order north–west–south–east actually goes to the left!

It seems the meaning is this: someone looking at the basin from above, and describing it in this order, goes around it **counterclockwise**. That is the rule: one goes around counterclockwise, as seen from above. So too with the sprinkling of blood on Yom Kippur, when the High Priest sprinkles blood on the four corners of the altar (Yoma 5:5).

And on Sukkot

On Sukkot we “turn to the right” in two opposite ways. The Hoshanot circuits go counterclockwise. But the lulav is waved according to the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 651:10), following the Maharil: “east, south, west, north,” that is, clockwise.



Waving the lulav according to the Shulchan Aruch: east, south, west, north.

In the 16th century, the Rama of Fano, Rabbi Shmuel Algazi and Rabbi Yosef Samiga debated this. Rabbi Algazi understood from Rashi that the Kohen walks around like a crab, that is, sideways, always facing the altar, so that every turn is to the right. The Rama of Fano mocked this: “Then in the holy place the Kohanim would walk like the blind, groping along the wall.” In his view, “to the right” is the direction the palm of the right hand faces when you stretch it forward, that is... to the left.

The simple explanation, “right” as counterclockwise, seems to spare us all these forced explanations. And in the words of the Rama of Fano: “Every thoughtful person is free to decide between us.”

The River of Egypt

In brief: The Torah promises Abraham the land “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.” What is the river of Egypt: the Nile, or Wadi el-Arish? And what happened when a scribe got the river’s name wrong in a bill of divorce written in the town of Eibenschütz?

The Nile or Wadi el-Arish?

The nearest river south of the land is the Nile, and some interpreted it that way, like Targum Yonatan in Parashat Masei: “to the Nile of Egypt.” But then the entire Sinai Peninsula would be part of the Land of Israel. That seems exaggerated, and it contradicts the Bible, which presents Egypt as a separate country on the banks of the Nile.

If we give up on a river that flows all year round, we can think of a wadi in the south of the land. Many Rishonim and Acharonim proposed Wadi el-Arish, in northern Sinai, like Rav Saadia Gaon, quoted by the author of “Kaftor VaFerach.”

The Radbaz, the chief rabbi of Egypt in the 16th century, wrote: “Without a doubt this is a well-known error; the clear truth is that the river of Egypt is what is today called Wadi el-Arish.” And he mocked one of the great men of the generation, who lived on the east bank of the Nile in order to “live in the Land of Israel,” yet asked that his bones be taken up to Jerusalem: “apparently, he changed his mind.”

In 1979, when the Begin government committed in the Camp David Accords to withdraw from Sinai, the question returned. Some rabbis ruled that the river of Egypt is the Nile, and that Sinai is therefore part of the land. And this view has some unexpected support.

The strange divorce of Eibenschütz

Eibenschütz is the town of Ivančice in Moravia, where Rabbi Natan Neta, the father of Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschütz, served as rabbi. It lies near the meeting point of three rivers.

In a bill of divorce (get), one writes the town and the name of its river, so as to identify the place beyond doubt. The book “Tiv Gittin” (p. 128) tells of a get written there, in which the scribe wrote: “Eibenschütz, which sits on the river Eibenschütz.” But Eibenschütz is the name of the town, not of a river! Even so, “three giants of the world” validated the get after the fact: the Maharal of Prague, the head of the rabbinical court of Kraków, and Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe of Poznań.

The permission is based on our parasha. The Torah writes “the river of Egypt,” although the river has its own name; that is, “the river near Egypt.” So too here: “the river near Eibenschütz.”

But if so, the river's name in the get adds nothing! In Germany one distinguishes between Frankfurt am Main and Frankfurt an der Oder. By this permission, one could write "Frankfurt on the river Frankfurt": how would we tell them apart?

In any case, these great authorities took it for granted that the river of Egypt is the Nile. And if we follow this to the end, the borders of the promise also include half of Sudan, Eritrea and a large part of Ethiopia. So why did anyone bother bringing the Jews of Ethiopia to the State of Israel, instead of leaving them there as settlers at the edge of the promised border? Interesting.

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The Sandak, the Gaon and Common Sense

In brief: There is a custom not to give the honor of sandak twice to the same person, because it "brings wealth," like the incense in the Temple. The Vilna Gaon rejected this with common sense: "We have never seen a sandak grow rich." And what does this teach us about segulot in general?

The honor of the sandak

The sandak holds the baby on his knees during the circumcision. This is no mere honor. The sandak is considered the "ba'al habrit," the master of the covenant.

Being sandak "brings wealth"

Rabbenu Peretz explains why the honor of sandak is not given twice to the same person. The Gemara in Yoma says that a Kohen who had offered the incense, the blend of spices burned in the Temple, never offered it again, "because the incense brought wealth." So the privilege was shared among the Kohanim. The same goes for the sandak: each son gets a different sandak.

The Rema writes the same (Yoreh De'ah 265:11): "the sandak is like one who offers incense," and so two children are not given to the same sandak.

The Vilna Gaon and common sense

The Vilna Gaon rejects this reasoning: "His words have no basis... and we have never seen a sandak grow rich." In his view, the custom comes from the will of Rabbi Yehuda HaChasid, not from wealth.

It is interesting how far the Gaon was willing to go with common sense. One could ask the same question about many things people do as a "segulah," and even about certain prayers: it is hard to see, statistically, that they help. Sometimes we hear a story in which the segulah worked. But here is what the author of "Darkhei David" wrote, in his introduction to tractate Sotah, about "the masters of

segulot” and the stories told about them: “Usually there is a small handful of people to whom all the strange stories happen, because they really need an excellent psychiatrist.”

12

Halakha and Reality: Three Kinds of Wrongdoing

In brief: Three times in Genesis, one of the Patriarchs says of his wife, “She is my sister.” The three stories describe three layers of sin: punishment for a deliberate sin, “sin” (chata’ah) for an unintentional one, and “guilt” (asham) when there is no sin at all, but reality has been damaged. Hence also the difference between the chatat offering, which atones for the person, and the asham offering, which repairs reality.

The central idea

When a person sins, three different things happen:

1. **Reality is damaged.** Something in the world has gone wrong, even if the person did not intend it.
2. **The person sins.** He did not listen to God’s voice. This is true even if he erred in good faith, if he could have been careful.
3. **The person is punished.** This happens only if he acted deliberately.

Each layer calls for a different response. For the damage to reality, one brings an **asham offering**. For the person’s sin, one brings a **chatat offering**. And for a deliberate sin comes **punishment**. This distinction runs through three stories in Genesis.

Three stories, three words

Three times, one of the Patriarchs asks his wife to present herself as his sister, before a king who might take her: Abraham and Sarah before Pharaoh (Genesis 12), Abraham and Sarah before Abimelech (20), and Isaac and Rebecca before Abimelech (26). Why does the story repeat three times? Look at the words:

- **With Pharaoh**, there is not a word about sin or guilt. There is only **punishment**: “The Lord afflicted Pharaoh with great plagues.” This is **mezid** (a deliberate sin).
- **Abimelech, to Abraham**, says: “You have brought on me and on my kingdom a great **chata’ah**.” This is **shogeg** (an unintentional sin, but with negligence).
- **Abimelech, to Isaac**, says: “You would have brought **asham** upon us.” This is **ones** (compulsion, with no fault at all). There was no sin, but a married woman was nearly taken from her husband. The situation itself is defective.

The proof from the verses

- **With Isaac**, the people of the place asked before doing anything: “The men of the place asked about his wife” (26:7). Isaac misled them. So they acted under compulsion: no sin on them, only the risk of damage to reality.
- **With Abimelech and Abraham**, Abimelech took Sarah without asking. He says to God: “In the integrity of my heart **and the innocence of my hands** I have done this.” But God answers only: “In the integrity of your heart you have done this” (20:5-6). The innocence of his hands, He does not confirm. So there was negligence: an unintentional sin, not compulsion.
- **With Pharaoh**, Abraham does not even try to justify himself. The Egyptians, writes Nachmanides, “were very wicked and sinful,” and took Sarah without asking at all. And of the plagues he writes that they came “because of the violence (chamas) done to Sarah” (Nachmanides, Genesis 12:11-17). “Chamas” is a word from the world of theft, and we will return to it.

Three stages in education

The three layers are also three stages in education:

1. **Fear of punishment:** do not sin, so as not to be punished.
2. **Fear of sin:** do not transgress God’s word, even without bad intent. That is, be careful even of unintentional sin.
3. **Protecting reality:** understand that God forbade these things because they damage the world. So even where there is no sin, one must make sure reality stays whole.

What is the asham offering?

There are six kinds of asham offering: three for a sin (the asham for misuse of sacred property, the asham for theft, and the asham for the “betrothed maidservant”), two for purification (of the nazirite and of the metzora), and the conditional asham (asham taluy), for a doubt.

The Mishnah (Keritot 9a) says that most asham offerings come for a deliberate sin as well, not only an unintentional one. This is strange, since an offering usually atones only for an unintentional sin. But two of them, the asham for misuse and the conditional asham, come only for an unintentional sin. So what do they all have in common?

The answer: **the asham offering comes for damage to reality, not for the person’s sin.** Usually, the damage is entering a domain that is not yours, like taking what belongs to someone else. Let us check this for each kind.

1. The “betrothed maidservant”

The “betrothed maidservant” (shifchah charufah) is a woman who is half maidservant and half free, betrothed to a Hebrew servant. Because she is half a maidservant, she is not considered an ordinary

married woman. So according to most views, a man who has relations with her does not even violate an ordinary Torah prohibition. And yet he must bring an asham offering. For what?

The Pnei Yehoshua (Gittin 43a) explains: even if there is no prohibition, she already “belongs” to someone else. That is why another man’s betrothal does not take effect on her. One who has relations with her has, as it were, stolen her from her husband.

Proof comes from the Maharik (Responsa of the Maharik, root 167; cited by the Rema, Even HaEzer 178:3). Ordinarily, a shogeg (one who sins unintentionally) is someone who did not know one of two things (Mishnah, Shabbat 67b):

- **He did not know the law:** he knew what he was doing, but did not know it was forbidden.
- **He did not know the facts:** he did not really know what he was doing. For example, he did not know it was Shabbat.

Throughout the Torah, both cases count as unintentional. But the Maharik rules that a woman who betrayed her husband willingly, knowing what she was doing but not knowing it was forbidden, is forbidden to her husband as if she had acted deliberately. Here, not knowing the law does not help. Only if she was mistaken about the act itself, for example if she thought the man was her husband and it turned out he was not, is she considered to have acted unintentionally, and she remains permitted to her husband.

Why? The Maharik infers it from the verse: “and commits a trespass **against him**” (Numbers 5:12). It does not say “commits a trespass against God,” as with the violation of a commandment, but “against him,” against her husband. So the problem is not the violation of the law, but the harm to the husband. And a woman who knew she was harming her bond with her husband harmed him, even if she did not know it was forbidden. The bond between a man and his wife is not only a law. It is a reality, and harming it is a “trespass” (me’ilah), even without a deliberate transgression.

2. The asham for misuse of sacred property

Me’ilah (misuse) is the use of something belonging to **hekdesh** (Temple property). The asham for me’ilah comes only for an unintentional act. Why?

Because the Torah defines me’ilah only as unintentional: “If a person commits a trespass **and sins unintentionally**” (Leviticus 5:15). Only when a person misuses Temple property by mistake does the object leave the Temple’s domain and become **chullin** (ordinary property). If he did it deliberately, he commits a sin, but the object remains Temple property.

What does this show? The sin exists even when the act is deliberate, and yet no asham is brought for it. So the asham does not come for the sin. It comes for **the object leaving the Temple’s domain**: for the damage to reality, which happens only when the act is unintentional.

Two surprising examples:

- **Eating without a blessing.** The Gemara says: “Whoever benefits from this world without a blessing has committed me’ilah” (Berakhot 35a). And the students of Rabbenu Yonah (ibid.) write that one who eats without a blessing must actually bring an **asham offering for me’ilah**, even though the blessing is **rabbinic** (an obligation set by the Sages, not by the Torah). The reason: one who benefits from the world without a blessing takes what is not his without permission. And this is exactly the damage to reality that requires an asham, even without a written source.⁶ That is why, the students of Rabbenu Yonah write, one who said even “shehakol” is free of me’ilah: he thanked God, and no longer took without permission.
- **Me’ilah with konamot.** A **konam** is a vow by which a person forbids an object to himself as if it were Temple property. For example: “This loaf is forbidden to me like an offering.” The bread does not become holy, and others may eat it. Yet the Gemara establishes, by reasoning, that one who benefits from something he forbade to himself by a konam “has committed me’ilah,” and must bring an asham offering for me’ilah. So rules Maimonides (Laws of Me’ilah 4:9). Yet the prohibition here is only “**bal yachel**” (the prohibition of breaking a vow), with no connection to holiness. What is more, the Mishneh LaMelech (ibid.) notes that according to Maimonides, there seems to be no prohibition of me’ilah here at all, only the obligation of the offering. So why the asham? Because the person entered a domain he had himself made forbidden, and so crossed a boundary in reality.

3. The asham for theft

In Parashat Noach we saw Rabbi Shimon Shkop (Sha’arei Yosher, gate 5): the prohibition of theft rests first on human property law, and the Torah only adds “You shall not steal” on top of it. So the asham for theft too, brought by one who holds another’s money and falsely swears he does not have it, comes for the damage to reality, and not only for the prohibition.

Chatat and asham: the difference

Now the difference is clear:

- **The chatat offering** atones for the **person** who sinned. That is why it distinguishes between unintentional and deliberate sin: for a deliberate sin there is no atonement by offering.
- **The asham offering** repairs the **reality** that was damaged. For reality, it makes no difference whether the act was done by mistake or on purpose. That is why most asham offerings come for deliberate sins as well.

Perhaps this is the meaning of the word “asham,” as Nachmanides writes (Leviticus 5:15): from “shemamah,” desolation. The purification asham offerings too, of the nazirite and the metzora, come to repair a defective state, not to atone for a sin.

⁶According to the Pnei Yehoshua (Berakhot 35a), any law derived from reasoning, that is, from logic without an explicit verse, is Torah law. He therefore wonders at the accepted ruling that the blessing before eating is rabbinic. In his view, the obligation to thank God is Torah law, and only the wording of the blessing is rabbinic. But the Tzelach (ibid.) disagrees: reasoning creates a Torah obligation only when it explains a law that already exists in the Torah, not when it creates a new law.

4. The conditional asham

The **conditional asham** (asham taluy) comes for a **doubtful sin**. For example: before a person there were two pieces, one of permitted fat and one of **chelev** (forbidden fat, whose deliberate consumption is punishable by karet). He ate one of them and does not know which. Perhaps he sinned, perhaps not. In such a case he brings a conditional asham.

The difficulty: Maimonides (Laws of Impurity of the Dead 9:12) writes that all doubts, “whether of impurity, forbidden foods, forbidden relations or Shabbat,” are forbidden only by the Sages. That is: by Torah law one may be lenient in a doubt, and the obligation to be strict is only rabbinic. The Ra’avad (ibid.) objects sharply: “This is a great error.” And many Acharonim asked: if Torah law permits eating a piece that may be chelev, one who ate it did not violate Torah law. So for what is he bringing an offering? According to Maimonides, the conditional asham has no place!

The Acharonim’s answer: some of them added a sentence in parentheses to Maimonides’ words: “Something whose deliberate violation is punishable by karet, its doubt is forbidden by the Torah, for one who does it must bring a conditional asham.” In their view, Maimonides is lenient only in an ordinary doubt. But when it is clear that a prohibition is present, and only which piece is forbidden is unknown (what is called “**ikba issura**”), the obligation to be strict is Torah law. Hence the conditional asham.

The rejection: but this answer is forced. The parentheses have no good source in the printed editions. What is more, in that very sentence Maimonides gives the examples of Shabbat and forbidden relations, which are punishable by karet, and writes that there too the doubt is forbidden only by the Sages. So the parentheses contradict his own words.

The explanation according to our approach: there is no need to change Maimonides’ words. True, by Torah law there is no obligation to be strict in a doubt, so one who ate a doubtful piece violated no commandment. But if the piece really was chelev, **reality was damaged:** chelev was eaten. And for damage to reality one brings an asham, even without a sin. That is exactly the conditional asham.

Why be strict in a doubt of Torah law?

This idea connects to the explanation of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (in his commentary on Shev Shmateta, shmateta 1), and before him Rabbi Shimon Shkop (Sha’arei Yosher, gate 2).

The background: according to Maimonides, the obligation to obey the Sages is Torah law, from the verse “You shall not turn aside” (Sefer HaMitzvot, principle 1). Nachmanides (in his glosses, ibid.) objected: if so, every doubt about a rabbinic prohibition is also a doubt about “You shall not turn aside,” which is Torah law. So why are we lenient in a rabbinic doubt?

The answer: there is a difference between the two kinds of prohibition.

- **A Torah prohibition** forbids something because it damages reality itself. When one eats chelev, the eating itself causes damage, even if one did not know it was chelev. So it contains two things: a **commandment**, and also **damage to reality**.

- **A rabbinic prohibition** is usually a fence: the Sages forbade something with no defect in itself, to keep us away from a Torah prohibition. For example, moving a hammer on Shabbat (muktzeh): moving it damages nothing in the world. The only problem is that we did not listen to the Sages. So it contains only a **commandment**.

And in a case of doubt, there is only a “doubtful commandment,” and “**a doubtful commandment is no commandment**”: one who does something that may be forbidden has not rebelled against a command. So in a rabbinic doubt, where there is only a commandment, we are lenient. And in a Torah doubt, the commandment does disappear, but the possible damage to reality remains. So we are strict. In other words, **the obligation to be strict in a Torah doubt comes from the damage to reality, not from the commandment**. And that is exactly what the conditional asham repairs.

This also explains the view of **Tosafot** (Keritot 17b): the conditional asham comes even for a **double doubt** (sfek sfeika: for example, a doubt whether the piece is forbidden, and another doubt whether he ate from it at all). Yet in a double doubt there is no obligation at all to be strict, not even rabbinic! The Acharonim raised this difficulty (Sha’ar HaMelech, Laws of Impurity of the Dead 9:12). But according to our approach it is understandable: the asham does not depend on whether there was an obligation to be strict. It depends only on whether damage to reality may have occurred.

Cheftza and gavra, action and result

In Parashat Bereshit we saw the distinction between mitzvot of action and mitzvot of result. Here a related distinction emerges: a prohibition **in the object** (be’cheftza: damage to the thing, to reality) and a prohibition **in the person** (be’gavra: the person’s sin). Its source is the Gemara (Nedarim 2b): a **vow** is a prohibition in the object, for the person forbids the object to himself; an **oath** is a prohibition in the person, for the person forbids himself from the object.

The Avnei Nezer (Orach Chaim 37) explains: a prohibition in the person is meant to protect **the person**, like the prohibition of eating creeping creatures: “Do not make yourselves detestable.” A prohibition in the object is meant to protect **the thing** itself, like **terumah** (the portion of the crop given to the Kohanim), which others may not eat, or Temple property.

And what is the difference between the two distinctions? Cheftza and gavra concern the **purpose** of the prohibition: what it protects. Action and result concern the **halakhic definition**: what exactly is forbidden. Usually the two match, but not always.

The bottom line

Not every sin is written in the halakha. Sometimes there is a “sin” without an explicit command, like entering another’s domain. And sometimes even what is written in the halakha only anchors something that exists before it. In every sin there are three layers: the damage to reality, for which the asham comes; the person’s sin, for which the chatat comes; and the punishment, which comes only for a deliberate sin. These are exactly the three stories of “Please say you are my sister.”