

Parashat Vayera 5778, 2017:

Who Was Lot?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first mention of Lot is found in the midst of the genealogical summations that appear at the end of Parashat Noach: “And Terah lived seventy years, and he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. And these are the generations of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 11:26-27, this and all Bible translations, *This Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Lot’s lineage is quite clear; he was the grandson of Terah and the nephew of *Avraham Avinu* (our father, Abraham). Moreover, Parashat Lech Lecha informs us that he lived a successful pastoral life with Abraham - until the latter deemed it best for them to separate from one another:

And also Lot, who went with Abram, had flocks and cattle and tents. And the land did not bear them to dwell together, for their possessions were many, and they could not dwell together. And there was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle and between the herdsmen of Lot’s cattle... And Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no quarrel between me and between you and between my herdsmen and between your herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not all the land before you? Please part from me; if [you go] left, I will go right, and if [you go] right, I will go left.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 13:5-9)

Lot followed Abraham’s adjuration and, seemingly because of his vast cattle holdings, “... chose for himself the entire plain of the Jordan.” The outcome of his choice altered the course of Jewish history until today: “Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain, and he pitched his tents until Sodom.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 13:11-12) Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Talmud Bavli, Horiot* 10b, presents Rabbi Yochanan’s interpretation as to the

underlying reason Lot chose to live in Sodom: “And the Midrash Aggadah interprets it in a negative manner: It was because they [the people of Sodom] were lustful and licentious that Lot [desired and] chose their region for himself.” (13:10, translation and brackets my own) As such, Lot’s departure from Abraham was far more than a change of geographic venue based upon economic need. Instead, his choice represented the tacit repudiation of a major part of the pre-Torah ethics and values that Abraham proclaimed and consistently modelled to the world.

Given the above, it is fascinating that our *parasha* initially portrays Lot in a very positive light, and as a champion of one of Abraham’s most celebrated behaviors, namely, *hachnassat orchim* (attending to the needs of one’s guests):

And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom, and Lot saw and arose toward them, and he prostrated himself on his face to the ground. And he said, “Behold now my lords, please turn to your servant's house and stay overnight and wash your feet, and you shall arise early and go on your way.” And they said, “No, but we will stay overnight in the street.” And he urged them strongly, and they turned in to him, and came into his house, and he made them a feast, and he baked unleavened cakes, and they ate. (*Sefer Bereishit* 19:1-3)

Lot had no idea that the “people” before him were really angels. Since he had grown up in Abraham’s home and was well-versed in the *mitzvah* of *hachnassat orchim* and its mandatory nature, he felt a strong urge to help these travelers in need. As Rashi states, “From the house of Abraham he learned to look for wayfarers.” (19:1) In this instance, however, there was a powerful confounding factor at play that surely did not escape Lot’s attention - it was a capital crime in Sodom to extend hospitality to wayfarers! Therefore, why did Lot place his very life in danger for this *mitzvah*, especially in light of his rejection of other key aspects of Abraham’s value system?

The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain *zatzal* (1855-1926), known as the “Shem Mishmuel” after the title of his most famous work, focused therein upon this conundrum:

One must delve deeply to understand the narrative of Lot placing himself in physical danger (*sakkanat nefashot*) in order to fulfill the commandment of *hachnassat orchim* – for this is even

above and beyond the practice of normal people - even those that are fitting and proper in all areas of their lives (*kesharim*). Rashi's suggestion that "from the house of Abraham he learned to look for wayfarers," is a necessary, but insufficient rationale, to explain why Lot placed himself in life threatening danger, since the people of Sodom had declared this [*hachnassat orchim*] to be a capital crime. (*Shem Mishmuel, Sefer Bereishit, Parashat Vaera*, this and the following translation and brackets my own)

Rav Bornsztain helps us understand the "story behind the story" regarding Lot's exceedingly meritorious behavior. Prior to exploring his analysis, let us remember that Lot was the father of Moab from whom Ruth, the Moabite great-grandmother of King David, descended. Armed with this key information, we are ready to encounter the Shem Mishmuel's deeply mystical perception of the inner essence of Lot's *neshama* (soul), and his behavior with the angels:

In addition to our original problem, it is difficult to comprehend, after everything is said and done – and after Lot left Abraham - why all that he had learned from Abraham did not save him [from his wicked and licentious impulses]. According to our understanding (*ach l'darcheinu*), however, one can say that Lot remained good in his innermost being (*b'penimiuto*), for after all, the soul of King David continued to remain within him. This, however, was not enough to enable him to improve his actual behavior [in other instances] ... After the angels arrived, however, his very essence was aroused, namely, the soul of King David, may his memory be a blessing, and affected even his outward behavior (*chitzonioto*) until he was willing to put his life in danger for the angels [whom he perceived as human wayfarers]. It is for this reason that he was fitting to be saved [from the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah].

Rav Bornsztain's statement that "Lot remained good in his innermost being (*b'penimiuto*), for after all, the soul of King David continued to remain within him" is deeply inspiring. It teaches us that no matter how people may appear on the surface, there may be nearly unlimited positive potential within them. This perspective is reminiscent of the words of a gifted young girl that continue to infuse the world with hope and meaning until our own time:

It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet, in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death... I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. (*Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, diary entry, Saturday, July 15, 1944, underlining my own)

With G-d's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the time when “iniquity will close its mouth and all wickedness will evaporate like smoke, when You [Hashem] will remove evil's domination from the earth.” (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Machzor* for Rosh Hashanah, p. 67) May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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