

Abraham and Lot — Two Paths Diverge

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Lech-L'cha* (Gen. 12:1 – 17:27)

By Michele Walot

“Vayomer Adonai el-Avram lech-l'cha mei'artsecha....”
“Adonai said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land....’”

“Now these are the chronicles of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nehor and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of Terah his father, in his native land, in Ur Kasdim.”¹ Lot was Abraham's nephew, brother of Sarah, and son of Abraham's brother Haran (who, says Rashi, died in Nimrod's furnace in Ur Kasdim.) According to Midrash, this is the very furnace that Abraham survived after Terah turned him over to King Nimrod for destroying the idols in Terah's shop. In Midrash Tanchuma, Rashi says that Terah saw Haran die after Haran was challenged to choose between Nimrod and Abraham and opted to go with the winner (who turned out to be Abraham). Because Haran did not choose out of faith in God, he perished in the furnace. If Terah hadn't turned Abraham in to the king, his brother Haran would not have died. Abraham and brother Nahor married Haran's daughters to carry on Haran's memory; then Lot joined Abraham's family as well.

In that spirit, Lot accompanied Abraham and Sarah to Egypt when the famine came along, as did the hordes of followers that Abraham had accumulated. Abraham was already very well respected for his kindness and his faith, and he was no pauper. When Pharaoh paid off Abraham for his “sister” Sarah, Abraham “acquired sheep, cattle, donkeys, slaves and maidservants, female donkeys and camels.” Abraham accepted all of this bounty in order to not arouse Pharaoh's suspicions that Sarah was really his wife.² With God on her side, Sarah managed to elude the Pharaoh's romantic overtures, and — thanks to plagues and signs — she was returned unsullied to Abraham.

Abraham and Sarah left Egypt with all of the bounty showered on them and were escorted to the border by Pharaoh's troops. According to Midrash, Abraham returned to previous lodgings and acquaintances to show them respect and to repay any obligations incurred on his trip to Egypt. The story goes on to say that even though Lot and Abraham were both very wealthy, the open pastures proved insufficient for their needs, and Lot's herdsmen started to trespass on private pastures without permission or regard for the owners' rights. The herdsmen countered with the assertion that the land was to be Abraham's, according to God's promise and that Lot was the only

¹ Genesis 11:27-28

² From the commentaries of the great Sephardic scholar, Isaac Arbanal

heir apparent; ergo, Lot need not worry about the Canaanites and Perizzites here. However, Rashi comments that Abraham was not yet the legitimate owner.

Abraham separated from Lot and asked him to select whichever region looked appealing. Abraham said that he would go off in the opposite direction. Without argument, Lot chose the lushest but most corrupt region of Sodom in the Jordan Valley in which to live, away from Abraham and God. It is implied that this choice was made out of greed and arrogance, Lot confident that he would be set for life!

When Lot had departed, God spoke to Abraham again and once more promised him that he *and* his innumerable descendants would inherit all the land in sight. “For all the land that you see, to you I will give it, and to your offspring forever.”³ Abraham responded by building an altar in the plains of Mamre in Hebron. Rashi comments that God does not commune with Abraham until after he and Lot had parted company because wealth had corrupted Lot and caused him to reject Abraham’s spiritual values. Keli Yakar⁴ notes that God’s first promise (before Egypt) was “To your offspring I will give this land.” Was Lot meant to be excluded? Or is it because Abraham was willing to give some of this land away to Lot that God reveals that the land will be his as well? Rabbi Avraham Fischer⁵ postulates that this unusual progression of the land being destined for unborn descendants and then for Abraham indicates that Abraham needed to envision the Promised Land for the children he was promised before he could envision any entitlement for himself.

When war between two coalitions of kings broke out, the king of Sodom was defeated, and Lot taken captive. Abraham armed 318 disciples and — against impossible odds — managed to rescue Lot, the rest of the people, and all of the looted possessions. Melchizedek, king of Salem and a priest, blessed God and Abraham, after which Abraham gave him a tenth of all the spoils. The king of Sodom brazenly asked for his subjects back, although he had no right to them, saying, “Give me the souls, and take the possessions.” Could he have had any regrets about the corrupt state of his domain? Abraham was entitled to everything but refused any personal gain. Abraham returned the people, including Lot, as the king requested, and the people resumed their corrupt ways.

The Stone Edition Chumash⁶, states that the people of Sodom were cruel and selfish particularly to poor immigrants, who would likely encumber the

³ Genesis 12:7

⁴ Rabbi Ephraim Shlomo of Luntshitz, 1550-1619

⁵ Commentary on Parashah Lech-L’cha; Torah Insights; 2003.

⁶ *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 65.

system. Well-to-do folks like Lot were welcomed, but the state made it illegal to help the poor, and strangers were targeted for sexual perversions to scare them off. Lot chose to remain in that environment even when he could have joined Abraham and Sarah after the war. This selfish disregard for a purer lifestyle was the antithesis of Abraham's approach to life, where he was touted for his hospitality and kindness to strangers. In *Parashat Vayeira*, Sodom will be destroyed and laid waste forever, and Lot will escape with only his life.

Questions:

What does it take to impress Lot? Abraham has overcome impossible odds over and over and yet Lot is comfortable with his material possessions in a horribly corrupt city. Does that seem reasonable that he would not expect the Sodomites to turn on him?

The name Lot means curses in Aramaic. Was it his curse that he couldn't rise to God's team with Abraham and Sarah? Why was Abraham able to leave his old life behind, turn his life over to God, and teach others by example?

Do you think that Sodom and Gomorrah are just heavy-handed hyperbole to teach the importance of following a spiritual path?