

LECH LECHA (GENESIS 12:1-17:27)

There Goes the Neighborhood!

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Lot was an orphan. His father, Haran, was burnt to a crisp when he was asked to choose between the G-d of his brother Abram and the idols of the dominant culture.

It was actually rather ironic. When the king, Nimrod, told Abram to worship idols or die, Abram was prepared to be cast into a fiery furnace and die for his beliefs. His brother Haran, however, was more pragmatic. He decided to hedge his bets. He figured: “If Abram is saved by a miracle, I’m with him. If Abram fries, I’m with the idols.”

Abram was saved by a miracle. Haran jumped into the flames and turned into toast. So much for pragmatism.

Haran’s son Lot began to travel with his uncle Abram, who also, by virtue of his marriage to Lot’s sister Sarai, was his brother-in-law.

By attaching himself his uncle/brother-in-law, Lot was setting himself up for good things. After all, G-d had told Abram, “...*I will bless you and make you great. You will become a blessing... All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.*” (Genesis, 12:2-3)

Abram prospered financially. So did Lot:

Abram was heavily laden with livestock, silver, and gold. . . Also Lot who went with Abram had flocks, cattle, and tents. The Land could not support them dwelling together for their possessions were abundant. (Ibid, 13:2, 5-6)

There was a problem. Rashi explains that Lot’s shepherds used to allow his flocks to graze on other people’s property. They reasoned that G-d had promised to give the Land of Canaan to Abram. Abram had no children. Hence, they reasoned, Lot, as next of kin, was entitled to everything he would one day inherit.

Abram’s shepherds quarreled with Lot’s shepherds. Abram would not tolerate this discord. He suggested, in the interest of peace, that Lot choose where he wanted to live; Abram would go elsewhere.

Lot chose the Jordan Plain -- Sodom and Gomorrah. It was lush and plentiful. It was also a place of decadence and perversion. But, in Lot’s eyes, that was ok:

Lot journeyed from KEDEM -- from the East. (Verse 11) The word *Kedem -- East*, also means *the Ancient One*. The Talmud interprets Lot's attitude: "He traveled away from the Ancient One of the World (G-d), saying, 'I want neither Abram nor his G-d!'"

It has happened so many times. "*Lot **who went with Abram** had flocks, cattle, and tents. . .*" Little did Lot realize that his success was due to the fact that he was "*. . . Lot who went with Abram.*" His affiliation with Abram was his source of blessing. However, he just couldn't take it. Abram was too holy, too righteous. He was "too Jewish." So Lot left. He didn't understand that G-d had promised to bless those who bless Abram. He just wanted to get out!

How many nations have invited us in, enjoyed success, and then kicked us out? How many countries have taken advantage of our business acumen, our love of learning, and our honesty and integrity, only to send us away?

It can happen here, too. We are blessed to live in a country that respects our rights to live according to our own beliefs. A Sabbath observer can sue an employer who seeks to deny that right. But not every American shares that open-mindedness toward religious freedom and expression.

Take, for example, my home county of Rockland, in New York. Monsey, in the Town of Ramapo, is known worldwide as a bastion of Torah Judaism. Synagogues, Yeshivas, Kosher bakers, butchers, and book stores make this a very comfortable place for orthodox Jews to live. And they are moving in in droves.

In 1991, a group of Ramapo residents, some Jewish, some not, incorporated the Village of Airmont. This village was founded, in the opinion of the Federal Government, for the express purpose of excluding orthodox Jews by, among other things, imposing restrictions on residential worship. Basically, they set up the zoning laws in a way that would make it impossible to put small synagogues into private homes, thus making it difficult for new residents to be within Sabbath walking distance of their Shuls.

The Federal government sued. And won. To this day, my home village of Airmont is paying of the expenses of trying to keep me out. This past June, the Feds sued Airmont again. This time, we ("WE?") are trying to keep a residential Yeshiva out, when other residential facilities are acceptable.

Around Ramapo, others are getting the same idea. The Town Supervisor is getting flak for assisting low income Jewish communities develop low cost housing. (Of course, if it were for any other group, the efforts would be lauded.)

I WANT TO CLARIFY A VERY IMPORTANT POINT. There are several legitimate concerns being voiced about many of the zoning issues. I would not automatically write off every concern as anti-Semitism. I agree with some of those concerns about the quality of life in my community. But it is quite clear from the tone that anti-Semitism (including the self-hating kind) is alive and well in Rockland County.

When I moved into my house last year, there were no Sukkahs to be seen on the half-mile walk from my Shul to my home. This year there were three. (Four, if you count the one in the parking lot of the Kosher pizza shop!) [ADDITIONAL NOTE, WRITTEN A YEAR LATER: This year there were eight!] [ADDITIONAL NOTE, WRITTEN YET A YEAR LATER: I've lost count!!] There goes the neighborhood!

One family recently sold their home. They didn't want to live among religious Jews. (The wife was Jewish; the husband was not.) They wanted to get out "before the Hasids come." So what did they do? They went up the street to their new religious neighbors to ask if they knew anyone who might want to buy their house!!!

Isn't that great! Religious Jews are moving in, driving real estate prices through the roof. The attitude of some of the anti-Semites, Jewish and otherwise, is take the money and run!

This past Tuesday, a rabbi I know was standing in front of the building where he had just voted. One of our fellow citizens walked past him and made a comment that says it all: "I can't stand looking at you people!"

Nice.

Let's look again at Lot. G-d blessed him as long as he stayed with Abram. He decided to leave Abram and move to Sodom. Sodom was destroyed and Lot ended up in disgrace and depravity. (See "The Most Powerful Force on Earth") He didn't know how lucky he was to have Abram around.

Things don't change. A Temple once stood in Jerusalem. A Temple where the People of Israel served the G-d of Israel. A Temple where every year, during the seven-day holiday of Sukkos, Israel brought seventy special offerings on behalf of the seventy nations of the world. The Babylonians and the Romans couldn't stand the concept of a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, so the Babylonians destroyed the first one, and the Romans destroyed the second one.

Too bad. If they had had any idea how much that offering in the Temple had accomplished for them, they never would have destroyed it. When's the last time you met a Babylonian or a Roman?

May G-d continue to bless America. May He continue to inspire our leaders and fellow citizens to follow the lofty principles upon which our beloved country was founded. May our fellow Americans remember G-d's promise to bless those who bless Abram's children.

And may He give Abram's children the wisdom to always appreciate that our freedom is a gift not to be taken for granted.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

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