

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

The Most Powerful Force on Earth

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Lot was a man of contradictions. He moved to Sodom to get away from his uncle Abraham. He didn't want to live near his uncle; Abraham was too . . . "religious." ("I can't tolerate Abram or his G-d!" -- Rashi's commentary on Genesis, 13:11) Yet, he adhered to many of the practices he had learned in his uncle's home. Abraham placed great emphasis on the Mitzvah of entertaining guests. Although hospitality was actually outlawed in Sodom, Lot risked his life by inviting strangers to his home. He served them Matzah, since it was Passover. (He had learned from his uncle, who was, of course, a prophet, that there would some day be such a holiday at that time of year.)

Lot chose to live among the Sodomites; he was attracted by the material wealth the city had to offer. The fact that it was a hotbed of evil and immorality didn't faze him. In fact, he seems to have preferred the decadent lifestyle of his neighbors over the restrictive morals of his uncle's home. Given the choice of Jerusalem vs. San Francisco, Lot chose 'Frisco!

Perhaps the best illustration of Lot's mixed-up priorities is his reaction to the mob that knocked on his door.

G-d had sent two angels to Sodom, disguised as men. One was sent to destroy this wicked city, while the other's job was to rescue Lot. In violation of Sodomite law, Lot had invited these "men" in. It didn't take long before the whole town knew about this "outrage."

"Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may know them."
(Genesis, 19:6)

Their plan to "know them" was a desire to commit a depraved act that is actually named after the city of Sodom. But Lot was not about to allow his neighbors to molest his guests. He had a much better idea:

"Please, my brothers, don't act wickedly! I have two daughters who have never known a man. I will bring them out to you; do with them as you please. Just leave these men alone. . ." (Ibid, verses 7-8)

Apparently, Lot's value system considered homosexual rape to be evil, while throwing his daughters to the wolves was okay. What kind of man would do such a thing? I'll tell you what kind. The same type of man who later allowed himself to get drunk, and impregnate those two daughters. (Ibid, verses 19:31-38) The Ammonites and Moabites descended from Lot's incestuous indiscretions.

The Torah is a holy book. It contains many heroes and many villains. There are righteous people like Moses and Abraham. There are sinners like Esau and Balaam. Where does Lot fit in?

Lot does not strike us as a paragon of virtue. He distanced himself from piety. Yet, there seems to be an element of decency that somehow redeemed him. After all, G-d sent an angel to lead him out of Sodom before He destroyed the city. What was it?

G-d destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because they were immoral. Was Lot any better than his neighbors? Is drunken incest any better than sodomy? Did Lot really deserve to be spared the fate that awaited his fellow Sodomites?

No, he didn't. Let us read what the Torah tells us about Lot's rescue:

*And it was when G-d destroyed the cities of the plain, that G-d remembered **Abraham**, so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval when he overturned the cities in which Lot lived. (Verse 29)*

On his own, Lot didn't deserve to be saved. It was only because *G-d remembered **Abraham***** that Lot was permitted to escape. It was a divine favor to Lot's uncle.

But, before we take all the credit away from Lot, let's look at Rashi's comment on the above-quoted verse:

"What does remembering Abraham have to do with Lot? He remembered that Lot knew that Sarah was Abraham's wife, and heard Abraham say in Egypt (in last week's Torah reading, when Abraham feared that the Egyptians would kill Sarah's husband and take her for the king) 'She is my sister.' Lot had compassion for Abraham and didn't reveal his secret. Therefore, G-d had compassion for him."

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, is telling us that Lot wasn't all bad. He kept quiet when his uncle's life was in danger.

My Rebbe, Rabbi Moshe Chait, (For information about my Rebbe, of Blessed Memory, click [here](#) and [here](#).) was troubled by this explanation. Big deal! **THAT'S** why Lot was saved?! Because he didn't tell the Egyptians that Abraham was Sarah's husband, he suddenly deserves a miraculous deliverance from G-d's well-deserved wrath?! If Lot had spoken up, that would have been a heinous act! The Egyptian cutthroats would have thought nothing of murdering Abraham had they known that he was Sarah's husband. What decent human being would give away that secret?

Let's look at this situation from a more modern perspective. Imagine an Aryan-looking Jew trying to escape from the Nazis. Is it considered a great act of compassion to not identify that person as a Jew? Wouldn't it be an act of common decency to keep quiet?

The Sifsei Chachomim, a commentary on Rashi's commentary, points out that Lot really had something to gain by speaking up. Abraham loved his nephew. The feeling doesn't seem to have been mutual. Lot was a greedy man. He was wealthy as a result of his association with Abraham. That's one of the reasons he originally stayed with Abraham. Now, with his uncle's life in danger, Lot, Abraham's next-of-kin, would have inherited everything. Yet, he held his tongue.

What keeps the world going? How does our precarious world continue to exist? G-d *suspends the world on "Bli-Mah"* -- *Nothing*. (Job, 26:7)

The earth sits, suspended in space, with "*Bli-Mah*," Nothing, to support it. (Sorry, mythology lovers, there's no Atlas out there!)

The Talmud (Chullin, 89a) makes an interesting play on words: "Rabbi Il'ah said, 'The world is sustained only by one who restrains (*BoLaiM*)** his mouth during an argument, as it is written, *He suspends the world on BLi-Mah*.'"

Noting the similarity between the Heb**rew root word for "restrain," (*B-L-M*), and the word for "nothing" (*BLi-Mah*), the Talmud provides a glimpse into Lot's dilemma.

Lot, a materialistic fellow could have become extremely wealthy by turning his uncle in to the Egyptians. All he had to say was, "He's her husband." Abraham would have been killed, Sarah would have been taken to the king, and Lot would have been the star of the show! He would, no doubt, have received additional rewards from the Egyptians, on top of what he would inherit from his uncle. Yet, he was silent.

My Rebbe pointed out that there is a feeling of power we have when we can say something that can affect others. The ability to hold back that urge is a dynamic force that supports us all.

Remember that argument you had with your brother-in-law the other day? (If any of my brothers-in-law are reading this, it's for illustrative purposes only. I love you guys!!) You really wanted to put him in his place. Or that know-it-all at the office? You know, that Yankee fan who made fun of the Red Sox. . . again! :-) Or how about the fact that you know who circulated that nasty rumor about the boss? Wouldn't it be great to say what you feel like saying?

Don't do it. Society today loves rumormongers. Our biggest heroes are the ones who aren't afraid to tell the world about who-did-what and are unconcerned with how badly we can damage reputations. We admire the masters of retort who can put down an adversary with a great "one-liner."

(I'm not referring here to "whistle-blowers." There are certainly times when one MUST reveal what one knows about crimes committed. There is a Mitzvah to reprimand wrongdoers. I'm referring to those who build themselves up by shooting off at the mouth and cutting others down.)

The Talmud says that when a human being utilizes self-control, he *suspends the world on "Bli-Mah"* -- *restraint*. By withholding inappropriate comments, a person displays strength of character that is a force so powerful that it sustains the world. By not saying what he was itching to say about Abraham, Lot, who otherwise deserved to perish, saved himself.

Sometimes, there is nothing more powerful than the ability to keep your mouth shut.

Have a great Shabbos.

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