

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

Immaculate Deception?

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The world was a desolate place. Sodom and Gemorrah had just been destroyed. They were such dens of iniquity that G-d would no longer tolerate their existence.

But He didn't destroy everyone:

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. (Genesis, 19: 29)

Lot, Abraham's nephew and brother-in-law, had chosen to leave the spiritually uplifting environment of Abraham's home, and moved into Sodom. 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!

Now that G-d was destroying the city, "...G-d remembered Abraham, so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval..." Lot was saved, basically because of his association with Abraham.

It was a horrendous scene. The angels who were sent to destroy Sodom and save Lot warned him and his family not to look back as they ran to safety. Since they were not all that righteous themselves, they had no business watching the punishments of their neighbors. Mrs. Lot, however, was curious:

His wife peered behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. (Ibid, verse 26)

Lot and his two surviving daughters hid in a cave. Now they were safe. However, a frightening thought occurred to them:

The older daughter said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is no man in the land to marry us..." (Ibid, verse 31) It wasn't that they were afraid of being old maids. They assumed, after the massive destruction they had just survived, that the entire human race had been wiped out. That cave was the "Noah's Ark" of that generation. Their father, who was an old man, was the last man on earth. Desperate situations require desperate measures. Adam and Eve's children had no choice but to marry their siblings. Lot's daughters had to make a difficult decision:

"... let us ply our father with wine...so that we may give life to offspring through our father." (Ibid, verse 32)

Their incestuous actions created the nations of Ammon and Moab:

The older daughter bore a son and she named him Moab; he is the ancestor of (the nation of) Moab to this day. The younger daughter also bore a son and she called his name Ben-Ami; he is the ancestor of the children of Ammon to this day. (Ibid, verses 37-38)

Understandably, our Sages are critical of Lot's daughters. Rashi points out that the older daughter takes more flak than the younger one because it was her idea:

...the older one came and lay with her father...the younger one got up and lay with him... (Ibid, verses 33 and 35)

Since the older daughter initiated the events, the Torah spells out in so many words that she ...*lay with HER FATHER*. The younger one ...*lay WITH HIM*. The Torah is slightly more subtle in describing the younger daughter's actions.

The subtlety (and lack thereof) continues.

The younger one called her son Ben-Ami, which translates as "Son of my Nation." She merely hinted at her son's illegitimate status. The hint was further nuanced by the fact that the nation became known as Ammon, which really doesn't translate as anything. Her sister, on the other hand, didn't pull any punches. She called her son Moab, which basically translates as "From Dad." Her descendants continued to be known as *Moab — From Dad — to this day*.

Lot's daughters' actions are problematic for a number of reasons. It appears that their actions might have been justified had they truly been the last three people on earth. But they weren't. Their neighborhood was destroyed, but the rest of the world wasn't. Of course, they didn't know that, but it would seem that they should have realized that their Uncle Abraham, who was considerably more righteous than their father, must certainly have survived.

So okay, they committed incest. It was a mistake. (Or, maybe not. To confuse matters a little bit, I should mention that Rashi says that the reason that G-d arranged for there to be wine in the cave was so that just this event SHOULD happen!)

In any event, what happened happened. Lot now had two illegitimate sons/grandsons, who were the fathers of two nations who would, some day, be a source of problems to their cousins the Israelites.

They were illegitimate. But why advertise it? Why Ben-Ami and Moab? Why name them "Son of my Nation" and "From Dad"? Why give the yentahs reason to talk? Why not a nice innocuous name like Calvin or Hobbs?!!

Curiously, “From Dad” went on to become the ancestor of the kings of Israel. Eventually, Ruth, a Moabite princess, would convert to Judaism and marry Boaz, one of the great Judges of Israel. Ruth’s great-grandson, David, was the father of the Royal House of Israel. We pray every day for G-d to send the Messiah to redeem Israel and rebuild the Temple. That Messiah, the future King of Israel, will be a descendant of David, Ruth, Moab/From Dad, and Lot and his daughter.

How? Why?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein used to tell a fascinating story from his days as the rabbi in the city of Luban, Russia in the 1920’s.

Rabbi Feinstein went to visit a man who was dying of a strange ailment that made his tongue swell. The patient requested that everyone leave the room so that he could speak to Rabbi Feinstein in private.

The man explained to Rabbi Feinstein that he understood why he was going to die in such a strange way. The Torah tells us the when Moses sent spies to check out the Land of Israel, ten of them spoke disparagingly about the Land. One who sins with the tongue is punished with the tongue. Those ten spies died from grossly enlarged tongues. (See Rashi on Numbers, 14:37)

What had this man done? What sin had he committed with his tongue?

The man explained that the previous week had been the week of this Torah Portion. The man had asked how it could be that the Messiah would some day descend from such ignoble people as Lot’s daughters. These women, he argued, didn’t even have the shame to cover up the fact that their children had been born as a result of an incestuous relationship. He saw from the fact that they had named their sons based upon their indiscretions that they were PROUD of their actions. How could such people DESERVE to have the Messiah come from them? He proceeded to speak about them in an extremely negative way.

That night two women, with their heads and faces covered, appeared to him in a dream. They identified themselves as — you guessed it — Lot’s daughters.

“We have been sent from the World of Truth to respond to your objections. You ask why we publicized the fact that our sons were from our father. We’ll tell you why. We really didn’t have to. We could have lied.

“We could have told the world that it was a miracle. After all, we were from the family of Abraham! We survived the destruction of the city of Sodom miraculously. We could have claimed that among the miracles G-d did for us was that He made us pregnant. We could have claimed that our sons were born by 'immaculate conception' and established a new religion based on that falsehood!

“But we chose not to do that. There is no such thing as ‘immaculate conception.’ We didn’t want to allow people to believe that G-d would do such a thing. We gave our children names that would make it obvious that they were our father’s children. We wanted to make it clear that when a woman becomes pregnant it is ONLY due to interaction with a flesh-and-blood man. We accepted this scorn and abuse in order to avoid teaching the world a lie. And THAT’s why we merited to have the future Messiah, the REAL Messiah, descend from us.

“One more thing. You sinned greatly by speaking so disrespectfully about us. You are like the Spies who spoke against the Land of Israel. G-d punished them for misuse of their tongues by distending their tongues. You shall die the same way!”

After the man finished telling the story to Rabbi Feinstein, he rolled over to face the wall, and he died.

(From Igros Moshe, Volume 8, page 15.)

Wow!

The Torah is filled with stories about great people. Sometimes the Torah criticizes them. Sometimes great people are subject to criticism for a sin that is so infinitesimal that if we would do it, it wouldn’t even register as a sin. (“Don’t criticize the pitcher for walking a few batters if you can’t even throw a ball to the catcher!”) It is BECAUSE they are so great that they are taken to task.

Sometimes the Torah criticizes great people. Sometimes our Sages criticize them. The criticism is there to teach us a lesson. But we have no idea who and what these people were. It behooves us to tread lightly when examining the deeds of Biblical personalities.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2009 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.