

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Vayera Part II

1. Lot and Sodom

The two angels (for the first time termed מַלְאָכִים, which may connote messengers or angels) arrive in Sodom in the evening (Gen. 19:1). Their purpose is to investigate whether the city is as wicked as the outcry that had been registered against it, and if so, to destroy it (as per 18:21). In the Masoretic text, this chapter continues the previous narrative without any break since the episodes are to be seen as closely connected. The chapter displays Sodom's sinfulness, describes the destruction of it and provides an account of the consequent incestuous origin of two of Israel's neighbors, Moab and Ammon. In the process, it imparts an extensive portrayal of Lot, contrasting him with Abraham, illustrating why ultimately he was not part of the latter's destiny. It demonstrates that although he exhibited certain very positive character traits, they were limited and distorted. Nevertheless, he merited to be saved, albeit not totally on his own merit but as a close relative of Abraham, as the text later specifies (Gen. 19:29).

Lot, sitting at the gate of Sodom, saw the two "men" arrive, greeted them in elaborate fashion and extended them hospitality.

However, in contrast to Abraham's courteous "hurried forward to greet them" and dignified "bowed earthward" (18:2), a harmonious balance, Lot merely "rises" to greet them and overdoes his bowing, "face to the ground" (19:1), lacking proper proportion. In his offer of hospitality, he reverses the natural order; he places sleeping first, washing feet second, and inexplicably omits eating. It may be assumed that his offer includes eating, but it is too important not to have been mentioned. The visitors are not impressed and at first refuse his offer, unlike the case with Abraham. But sensitive to their need, Lot is insistent and they finally accept.

He makes a *mishteh* for them and bakes matzoh. In most of its Scriptural attestations, *mishteh* – often

meaning a feast – is a comprehensive term for the whole meal and is not limited to "drink," the literal translation of the word (cf. especially Gen. 26:30). The statement that he baked matzoh after stating he made a *mishteh* is unusual and seems intended to contrast with Abraham, who had Sarah baking bread-cakes. Lot was not successful in transmitting his values to his wife, who did not practice hospitality to strangers even when the guests were already in her home! Her absence here foreshadows her upcoming fate. And one wonders, where are Lot's two single daughters who could have been helpful? The contrast to Abraham, who had his household participating in the hospitality, is palpable.

The Sodomites noticed that Lot had invited the strangers to his home. Before bedtime, the town's male populace, young and old, surround Lot's house and demand that he turn over the strangers to them for homosexual purposes. Sodom's wickedness is contrasted with Lot's righteousness. He vigorously defends his guests, closing the door behind him, not deterred by the possible danger he was confronting. He begs "his brethren" not to sin. In a desperate, imbalanced attempt to fulfill what he perceives to be his responsibilities as a host he offers the crowd his two nubile, virgin daughters in place of his guests, all to no avail. On the contrary, they vehemently reject his reproof and express disdain for him; "One who comes to dwell [an outsider] and he shall judge (וַיִּשְׁפֹּט וַיִּשְׁפֹּט)?" (19:9). Their use of the term וַיִּשְׁפֹּט וַיִּשְׁפֹּט to criticize Lot's attempt to prevent their evildoing contrasts with Abraham's use of that root in his plea to G-d (18:25) to save Sodom from destruction because of their evildoing.

The townspeople decide to carry out their evil designs against Lot and press forward. Lot commanded no respect whatsoever from them. They did not value his hospitality to strangers to begin with and could not abide moral instruction from him. Only the angels' supernatural intervention saved him.

Although far from saintly, Lot is definitely not of the Sodomites' ilk. He apparently did not know what he was getting himself into when he chose to live in Sodom. The materialistic opportunism that prompted him to accept separation from Abraham led him step by step into the unfortunate predicament in which he now found himself. The Torah subtly points to this gradual regression. In separating from Abraham he chose as his portion the verdant Jordan plain, which reaches to Sodom (13:10-11). In the next verse we are told that he "pitched his tents up until Sodom," making the point that he did not become part of that city. Verse 13 informs us that the inhabitants of Sodom were very evil. Despite its iniquity, in Lot's next appearance on the scene, "he was dwelling in Sodom" (14:12).

Lot hears from the angels that they were about to destroy the city since their investigation was completed; they had just witnessed the city's depravity. Upon being told to warn his family, Lot attempted to persuade his sons-in-law who lived in Sodom to depart. However, they were totally unreceptive to his message and had a condescending attitude toward him: "He was as a jester in his sons-in-law's eyes" (19:14). That they were so untroubled by the cruel and perverse society they lived in and could not heed a warning of divine retribution casts a further incriminating light on Sodom. In the book of Ezekiel we read, "Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She had eminence, the fullness of bread, safety and tranquility as well as for her daughters, but the poor and the needy she did not support; they became haughty and committed abomination before Me, so I eliminated them" (Ezek. 16:49-50).

With all that had transpired that evening, Lot had not fully learned his lesson to be strictly attentive to the angel's instructions. Perhaps he was gathering possessions, perhaps it was his nature to procrastinate or to rely on others to rescue him or perhaps he was not completely convinced of the angel's message. When the dawn deadline drew close he still had not departed. The angels then urged him to leave immediately with his wife and two single daughters lest he perish with the city. And still he tarried! "In Hashem's pity on him," the angels physically took hold of him, his wife and two daughters and placed them outside the city.

As they were removed from the city they were warned not to look back upon penalty of death. Looking back reflects gloating. It may also be an attempt to observe G-d's meting out retribution to the sinners. In either event it was conduct that they were not entitled to engage in. Lot's wife was not sufficiently disciplined; she looked back and was transformed into a pillar of salt, melding into the landscape.

Although Lot had some relatively fine qualities and was innocent of the Sodomite evil, the verse that recapitulates the devastation adds an important element – Lot was saved because G-d remembered Abraham (19:29). Abraham's merit, undoubtedly together with the fact that he had a strong sense of responsibility for his orphaned nephew (vividly manifested in rescuing him from captivity by the four kings), was decisive.

The vile corruption of the Sodomites was clear. They grossly violated the most fundamental standards of human decency in attempting to rape the innocent guests. Young and old had gathered around the house for the outrage – all the men of the town – demanding and threatening. They rejected Lot's request to observe basic norms of hospitality and his call for compassion. They were on the verge of becoming violent and were stopped only by the action of the angels. It is noteworthy that the "Concubine in Gibeah" story (Jud. 19) contains a great deal of imagery (absent the angels) similar to that present in our episode. It also contains a number of strikingly similar details and terms (including several uncommon usages found in our larger Genesis context) that leaves hardly a doubt that linkage – whatever its meaning – is intended.

2. Lot's Daughters and Related Cases

After the destruction, Lot and his daughters find themselves isolated in a mountain cave. Mindful of the enormous devastation that had occurred, they realized that they alone were saved from Sodom, and that the neighboring cities were also destroyed. Accordingly, the girls assumed that "there is no man in the land to consort with us in the way of the land" (v. 31). (The small city of Zoar had been spared at their father's request. But as they feared to remain in it and withdrew, they probably assumed it too had

been destroyed.) It appears that they considered themselves responsible to begin repopulating a desolate land. At the minimum, they were concerned that since their father was old and their mother dead, it was only through them that his lineage could continue. They got him drunk to enable him to impregnate them without his knowledge, for he probably would not have agreed had he known. (Ironically, he had offered their virginity to the townsmen and ultimately he removed their virginity himself.) Thus is portrayed the incestuous conceptions of the progenitors of Moab and Ammon, neighbors and long-term rivals of Israel, and of Ruth the Moabite, who derives from Lot's liaison with his elder daughter.

Interestingly, Ruth's husband Boaz derives from Perez, who himself was born through a sincerely motivated, albeit illicit, sexual union brought about through deception, that of Tamar and her father-in-law Judah (Gen. 38). Ruth herself had attempted a sincere, furtive sexual union with Boaz, a temptation he withstood with foresight and discipline, postponing their bonding until, and only if, it would be legal (Ruth 3:7-13). A most prominent descendent of the Boaz-Ruth connection with the doubly "illicit" background was the extraordinary King David (4:17). Despite some dreadful shortcomings, he possessed superlative qualities and achieved the lofty status of being described in the following terms: "Hashem made David victorious wherever he went. David reigned over all Israel and David executed justice and righteousness (מִשְׁפָּט וְיִצְדִקָה) to all his nation" (2 Sam. 8:14-15). It is also noteworthy that King Solomon's wife, the mother of his son Rehoboam, through whom the royal line was transmitted, was *Na'ama Ha'Ammonit*, a descendant of Lot's liaison with his younger daughter (1 Kgs. 14:21).

What exactly is the Scriptural message in that the Davidic line descended from such a union?

In a Talmudic passage that contrasts Kings Saul and David, Rabbi Yehudah in the name of Shemuel attributes the short reign of Saul to the fact that there was no question in regard to his pedigree, in accordance with the policy statement articulated by Rabbi Yoḥanan in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehosadaq: "We do not appoint a *parnas* (leader) over the public unless a *קָפָה שֶׁל שְׂרָצִים* (a 'basket of

rodents,' a cause of defilement, signifying questionable background) is hanging behind him, so that if he becomes haughty and arrogant, we can say to him, 'look at your background'" (b. *Yoma* 22b).

Of course the lessons go much further. Our national history indicates that divine providence comes down on the side of pure and innocent intentions as opposed to the strict letter of the law. One may not ignore major compelling values for the sake of being overly technical.

That the royal line of Israel derives in part from an illicit – or what may even be termed abominable – relationship, albeit one that resulted from sincere intentions, teaches an invaluable lesson. A background of lowly birth does not condemn an individual to an ignoble life. Each human being has the potential to rise to great heights. Rabbi Tanḥuma in the name of Rabbi Shemuel specifically linked the actions and motivations of Lot's daughters, viewed as contextually warranted and valid, to the future messiah king (*Gen. Rab.* 51:8).*

3. Sending Away Hagar and Ishmael

Abraham was deeply opposed to sending away Hagar and Ishmael as Sarah had requested. G-d commanded him, however, that "all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice" (Gen. 21:9-14). But why did he send them with so few provisions, just some bread and a jug of water on her shoulder?

Some have answered that Ishmael was apparently sent away after Isaac's weaning (in accordance with the sequence of verses 21:8-9). At that time he was several years older than the thirteen he was at the time of Isaac's birth. In such a case, Hagar and Ishmael could surely be expected to successfully fend for themselves in a region with which they were familiar. Had Hagar not gotten lost – an occurrence that was totally unexpected – there would not have been any problem, especially as the water well was right there. In addition, Abraham had G-d's assurances for Ishmael, a consideration not normally to be relied upon in judging one's responsibilities, but which under the unusual circumstances of acting upon G-d's specific command may come into play. After all, this is what Sarah asked him to do, to "drive away this maid and her son." These explanations do not appear

adequate to explain why Abraham did not at least give each of them a portion.

It should be borne in mind, however, that Sarah's request that Abraham send Ishmael away was based on her desire that Ishmael not inherit "with my son, with Isaac" (v. 10). Her request was made immediately after she observed Ishmael *קִיץ* (literally "playing or laughing," but a word that may possess a sexual connotation [see Gen. 26:8]). She may have felt that Ishmael would be a negative influence on Isaac. Perhaps the *קִיץ-קִיץ* word-play – seemingly intentional, especially as there is other word-play in the passage – is a subtle hint that she feared Ishmael would usurp Isaac's role. In any event, inheritance was a chief concern. In instructing Abraham to comply with Sarah's request, G-d added, "for through

Isaac will progeny be attributed to you" (v. 12). Since inheritance was key, recent discoveries appear to have provided the long-forgotten explanation of the parsimonious parting gift. An ancient Near Eastern law specified that a father who desired to disinherit a son who had been born from a maid-wife had to make a clear, unambiguous break with him in sending him out from his home. So, had Abraham given anything significant to Ishmael at the time, it would subject his intentions and the disinheritance act to possible future contention.

Endnote

* See our study *Reflections on Megillat Ruth*

©2009 Sephardic Institute