

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

תשפ"ב

The parsha starts with an amazing story. Avrohom Ovinu was in the middle of speaking with Hashem. The weather was extremely hot and he was outside waiting for guests. Hashem appeared to him, and then he saw three people. He didn't realize that they were angels. Avrohom brought them in and told them to wash their feet before they enter. Avrohom assumed that they were primitive Arabs who worshiped the dirt on their feet.

According to Rashi, Avrohom told Hashem: "Please excuse me, but I have to attend to these three Arab, idol worshipping travelers." It is an amazing lesson in the importance of *bein odom le'chaveiro*.

Later in the parsha when the "Arab" guests depart, Hashem said that He needed to tell Avrohom what is going to happen to S'dom. Why? It is because Hashem knew that Avrohom is going to continue to make a nation based on righteousness and justice. Avrohom prioritized this value of *bein odom le'chaveiro* in his life and everything he did and this is why he was chosen by Hashem.

We now come to the story of Lot. His story is tragic – just like his father Horon. Avrohom was in Ur Kasdim preaching to everyone that Hashem is true and avodo zoro is false. Those in charge were not very tolerant of Avrohom's message. His own father turned him in to be punished for denying avodo zoro. We are talking about a civilization without any notion of chesed and emes. Avrohom was introducing a radical new concept – the Derech Hashem – to the world. Without these ideas of chesed and emes, righteousness and justice, we are just intelligent animals. If all you think you are is an intelligent animal – descended from monkeys like most people believe – you naturally act like one. The Rambam wrote that those societies who did not come into contact with the ideas of the Torah, like the people who live in jungles in Africa, are still absolutely primitive and morally deprived.

Avrohom was so adamant to teach the truth of Hashem that he was willing to be thrown into a fiery furnace. They asked Horon – what about you? Whose side are you on? Avrohom's or Nimrod's? Horon responded, "Let us first see what happens to Avrohom. If he survives, I'll go to his side. I'll stay with the winner." Avrohom was miraculously saved from the fire and they threw Horon in. But he was not miraculously saved. Hashem isn't interested in saving people who aren't sincere and are only trying to be pragmatic.

The family had to leave Ur Kasdim and go to Choron and then to Eretz Canaan. Avrohom started out as a poor man and came out of Egypt as a wealthy man. Lot became wealthy as well – because of his association with Avrohom. Lot saw the miracles done for Avrohom in Ur Kasdim and in Egypt. It is abundantly clear that Hashem was taking care of Avrohom and was fulfilling His promises. Lot tagged along with Avrohom and saw everything that was happening.

But once he got wealthy, Lot became a different person. Money blinds. Once money becomes a value in and of itself, you lose your moral compass and you start to cut corners to make more money. Avrohom was a man of absolute truth and he could no longer coexist with Lot. So they decided to part ways. Lot saw the fertile, prosperous region of S'dom, and was instantly sold. He didn't care about the spiritual and moral level of the society he was moving into. The midrash says Lot suddenly didn't need Avrohom and his God. Because now he has money and this is the highest priority.

Money is the most pernicious avodo zoro that exists.

On the night of makkas bechoros, Hashem destroyed all the idols on Egypt to show there is no other power besides Hashem. But Hashem left one idol standing – Baal Tzefone – the god of money. It seems that money is always the last avodo zoro to collapse.

The verses are abundantly clear, Lot was well aware that the people of S'dom are horrible, evil people. But he went there anyway.

Lot's story continues in this parsha:

Hashem told Avrohom of His plans to destroy S'dom and Avrohom pleaded on their behalf. Avrohom cared about people. He saw the tzalem Elokim in everyone – in three primitive Arabs and in these evil people.

The angels came to S'dom and found that Lot was made into a judge that day. This is what sealed the fate of S'dom. Why? If Lot was the most honest guy in town why did that mean that his appointment as a judge necessitated the destruction of S'dom? His job was to enforce honestly a corrupt system and corrupt laws. No one can survive in such a situation.

Lot invited these angels to his house. He learned to offer hospitality to strangers from Avrohom Ovinu and this training lasted. But once the people of S'dom found out about this single act of chesed, they wanted to kill him. These are tragic verses. On the one hand, Lot wanted to join the society of S'dom. He wanted to be accepted. They apparently looked up to Lot as a respectable, honest person and they made him a judge. But the moment he offered hospitality to strangers and wanted to do chesed, he was now a complete outsider – rejected by the society of S'dom that Lot so much wanted to integrate himself into.

This is the tragic story of many Jews today. They want so much to be accepted by the non-Jews and be treated like everyone else. But sooner or later, the non-Jews tell them the truth – Jews are not like the rest of us. They don't really belong.

Lot went out of his house to beg the people of S'dom to spare his guests. But they refused to back down and they were about to kill him to break into the house. The angels grabbed Lot and pulled him inside and struck the people with blindness. Lot didn't realize what kind of guests he had until now! He should have thought about what just happened and been moved by it. But when they told him he had to run, Lot paused. He hesitated. He couldn't make a clear decision. The angels had to pull him and his family out of the city.

The angels instructed Lot and his family not to look back at the destruction of S'dom. Why not? Because by looking back you reveal that you are still emotionally connected to the place and to the people. If you can't make a clean break from the society of S'dom, you are doomed to share their fate. Lot's wife couldn't make that break – she still felt connected, and she turned into salt.

The angels told them to flee to the hills. They are telling Lot: you see where your bad choices have brought you. You got corrupted by money and it almost destroyed you when you wanted to belong to S'dom. Go to Avrohom and climb back to that level you achieved before! You lost all your money anyway! Lot responded that it's too late. He has sunk so low that in the shadow of Avrohom, he will be considered evil. He can't make it back to that higher level now. How tragic – he had a real option to climb back. But, since he got used to a low life, it is very hard to pick himself up and change completely.

Lot asked to go to the city of Mitz'or and they granted him his wish. Then the destruction of S'dom came.

A few weeks ago, there was a major article in a scientific journal. It showed me just how stubborn people are. Archeologists were excavating the area of the Dead Sea and came to the conclusion that around 3400 years ago, a meteor exploded over the area of S'dom and Amoroh and spewed all kinds of toxic material which permanently destroyed all life in the area.

If you would just read this as reported, it is a clear corroboration of the story in Chumash! Hashem obviously sent them this meteor from the heavens to destroy S'dom! But these scientists can't accept the simple explanation. They came up with a twisted scenario where the meteor explosion came first and the primitive people living in the area at the time couldn't explain it. So they concocted a myth about S'dom and Hashem's punishment to make sense out of it. The scientific community can't accept the obvious evidence to the fact that Hashem passes judgment upon society and will wipe them out when they reach a certain point of moral corruption.

I always say that if a bas kol would come down from Heaven in the middle of the day proclaiming Hashem exists, the scientists would start scrambling and trying to find ways to explain it in natural terms. They cannot accept the difficult truth that their whole outlook on life is false.

Lot for various reasons could not remain in Mitz'or and left to a cave in the mountains. He lived with his two daughters and had two children with them. Why did this happen? The daughters concocted a whole theory to justify living with their father. They convinced themselves that they must be the only human beings alive on the planet.

These daughters also refused to accept the message that they were supposed to get from the angels. How could they think that the whole world was destroyed? The angels told them explicitly that they are only destroying S'dom because they were too wicked. Not the whole world! They left Mitz'or untouched. They instructed the family to rejoin

Avrohom Ovinu. But this was too uncomfortable to accept. They didn't want to believe the angels. They didn't want to face the fact that they aren't willing to improve their level by moving back with Avrohom. They would rather believe that the whole world was destroyed and make peace with their low level and live with their father.

It would be a shocking story if it wouldn't be happening all around us all the time. People can't accept uncomfortable messages – sometimes by angels, sometimes by pesukim, and sometimes by maamorei Chazal. If you are honest, you get the message and you can't remain the same person. But most people try to delude themselves with fantasies. The reality is that the world is in chaos – economically, politically and socially. It can't get back to stability. Hashem is showing us that He is unhappy with this world.

The events which shook up the world over the past year and a half affected us as well. Hashem is expecting us to respond and to change. We have to say we aren't part of the world and then we can escape the upheavals and the chaos that are affecting the world. But this means we have to live up to a higher standard than the rest of humanity and this can be very difficult. We have to shake off old habits and reject old lifestyles.

When I read the story of Lot, I realize how similar it is to so many tragic lives today. He was corrupted by money and it destroyed his character and everything he accomplished when living with Avrohom. He had every opportunity in the world to come back and regain his higher level after his money was gone. But he felt stuck in his low level and refused to pull himself back up. He and his family deluded themselves and made all kinds of excuses to remain where they were and Lot died in disgrace.

Avrohom can't remain in the area after what happened. No one is travelling through anymore – and he has to continue his mission to spread the message of chesed and emes.

After all that has happened, Avrohom doesn't change – he remains uncorrupted by money and honor and this is why we are here today.