

PARADOXICAL LOT

by Rabbi Dovid Green

In this week's parsha we are introduced to a paradoxical fellow named Lot. Lot was the son of Avraham's deceased brother, Haran, and the brother of Sarah, Avraham's wife. When Avraham was commanded by G-d to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house, Lot went with him. Avraham was Lot's mentor and protector. However, as we shall see, the relationship was not simple, and its repercussions were not all good.

The Torah tells us that Avraham and his family went down to Egypt to avoid the famine in the Land of Canaan. Avraham and Lot both became very wealthy in Egypt. As they made their way back to the Land of Canaan, it became apparent that the land would not be able to provide for all of their livestock if they would remain together. Avraham's shepherds fought with Lot's shepherds, and Avraham suggested they separate on friendly terms. Lot chose to go to Sodom, which was a place overflowing with natural resources.

Much has been written regarding this relationship between Avraham and Lot. In Midrash Rabbah (parsha 41) Rabbi Yuda says that G-d became angry with Avraham for parting with Lot. According to Rabbi Nechemya G-d was angry with Avraham for having anything to do with Lot. Another midrash states that G-d and His heavenly court disagreed on Avraham's culpability for having anything to do with Lot. In this midrash G-d is recorded as having taken the side of Avraham. The Zohar points out that in Aramaic, which is closely related to Hebrew, and the language of Avraham's birthplace, Lot means curses. Rashi points out (Genesis 13:14) that as long as Lot was with Avraham, G-d refused to speak to Avraham.

Even the personality of Lot is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the midrashim state that Lot left Avraham willingly because he wanted no part of Avraham or his G-d (Rashi, Genesis 13:11). He also saw the potential for wealth and status in Sodom, and went for it wholeheartedly. On the other hand, Lot became a judge in Sodom, and tried to influence its inhabitants to do good. He even risked his life on behalf of the two heavenly messengers disguised as men who had come to save him and destroy Sodom (Genesis chap. 19).

The understanding which Rav Dessler, of blessed memory, (Michtav MeEliyahu, volume 2, p.166) gives us is as follows. Avraham certainly had an obligation to reach out to Lot, a member of his family. Still, the relationship was a negative one for Avraham which could even hurt him. Rav Dessler explains that even Avraham on his great spiritual level was in danger of being brought down by Lot.

Why is Avraham faulted for parting with him? The reason is that Avraham had not elevated himself to the level at which he would have been safe from Lot's influence. Avraham could have been a person who would not have been damaged by his relationship with Lot. However, he had not attained that level as of yet. As such, Avraham is faulted for not being able to maintain a connection with Lot. At the same time, Avraham would be faulted for not recognizing his limitations, and parting with Lot.

Another aspect of blame which is placed on Avraham is that they parted as a result of the strife which took place between his and Lot's shepherds. Rashi comments that Lot's shepherds claimed that since Avraham was promised the land, and he had no inheritor, Lot would be the inheritor. That being the case, Lot could let his livestock graze in fields belonging to the present inhabitants of the Land of Canaan. Avraham's shepherds only tried to impress upon them that this is not so. Had the shepherds taken a more loving, positive approach, and not come to strife, Lot would not have had to part. All that Lot and his descendants did subsequently was partly the result of his not remaining in the proximity of a great man such as Avraham. Avraham is faulted for that.

What does this all mean to us? Regarding all who come into our sphere of influence, an approach of warmth and love must be the primary form of influence used. At the same time we must not allow our desires for worldly matters to pull us away from our own sources of spiritual sustenance. Lot certainly convinced himself that leaving Avraham and going to Sodom was "for the sake of heaven." The student of Torah takes the issue of negative influences very seriously, and takes action to make sure that sources of his and his children's attitudes are the ones he truly feels are correct. What are the kinds of attitudes we would want to strengthen in ourselves and our children? Are there influences in our lives which we disapprove of? If so can we affect any change in them?

Good Shabbos!

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