

DOING AS WE DO

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The story of Lot and his relationship with his daughters is among the most enigmatic in the Torah. In our first encounter with Lot and his daughters, Lot the father, is willing to give up his two daughters to an angry mob of Sodomites in order to protect two strangers from harm. The notion of a father's willingness to subject his daughter to such an abhorrent debasement, for any reason, offends our moral and emotional sensibilities.

The scene is even more baffling considering Lot's background. Lot was the brother of Sarah and the nephew, brother-in-law, and student of Avraham. >From the time his father died, his Uncle Avraham raised him. Lot had traveled with Avraham and Sarah to Canaan and then to Egypt. Lot was the direct recipient of Avraham's attention and teaching, and it was assumed that Lot would have a major role in the development of the Jewish nation. As we know, Lot did contribute a major component in the eventual birth of Mashiach through Ruth his great-grand daughter.

Upon their return to Canaan from Egypt, Lot and Avraham went their separate way. Lot chose the lush sensuality and the seeming freedom of the Jordanian Plains, while Avraham and Sarah continued sowing the seeds of monotheism. Lot immersed himself in the debauchery and amorality of Sodom while Avraham sanctified himself and his world in the service of G-d.

What happened to all Lot's years of training and study? What happened to the profound influences of Sarah and Avraham's home? How could Lot fall so far from the ideals of personal dignity and social justice? How could such a man suggest selling his own daughters, and his own soul, no matter how seemingly noble the cause?

Furthermore, the last chapter in the destruction of Sodom is equally puzzling. Lot, his wife, and his two daughters were miraculously saved from the conflagration of Sodom. The wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and his daughters escaped into the mountains and took shelter in a cave. The Torah then related how the two daughters conspired and seduced their drunken father from which the two nations Ammon and Moav eventually emerge.

How did the daughters rationalize their actions, and how did Lot allow himself to be seduced? On the one hand, Rashi references the Medresh on 19:31 that explains the daughters reasoning. "â€|There is no man in the world to marry usâ€|" "The daughters thought that the entire world had been destroyed, just as it had been destroyed during the Mabul. Therefore, for the continuity of the human race they had to seduce their father."

On the other hand, if their actions had been motivated by such virtuous motives, why did they have to get Lot drunk? Why didn't they openly enlist Lot's blessing and participation?

By what virtue did they believe that they were the sole survivors of a second world destruction? Could they have possibly believed that they were more righteous and deserving than Avraham and Sarah? The great Avraham, their Great Uncle, would have certainly been saved. He could have fathered their children without the taint of incest! Why didn't they insist on returning to Avraham. Furthermore, why wasn't Lot shocked into immediately returning to the safety and teachings of Avraham?

In last week's Parsha, Lot departed from Avraham and moved to Sodom. In doing so, he intentionally distanced himself from the values and teachings of Avraham and Sarah. What was his rational for doing so? On the one hand, the Medresh on verses 13:11 & 12 referenced by Rashi is brutally critical of Lot's motives, "I want nothing to do with either Avraham or His G-d." The Talmud was not interested in Lot's rationalizations or excuses. The Talmud tells it the way it was. On the other hand, Lot himself must have had some rational. What were his reasons for separating from Avraham and Sarah?

Lot's behavior upon his return from Egypt revealed that he thought of himself as Avraham's heir. Rashi's comments on the argument between the shepherds (13:7) underscores this attitude. Therefore, Lot must have been quite angry at Avraham's insistence that they each go their separate ways. In deciding to move to Sodom, Lot wanted to show his Uncle and mentor that he too could change the world. He too could take on the likes of Sodom and teach them to believe. However, as in many such instances, Lot was not honest with himself. He did not admit to the more prurient interests that had directed his move to Sodom. Therefore, in the end, although Lot continued to maintain the illusion of being the "Judge/teacher" (see Rashi 19:1) he compromised his values and morals in the process. Instead of being the teacher, Lot became the student and learned the ways of Sodom.

The scenario of Lot's slippery slide down toward the amoral morass of Sodom and Gemorah is not unique. Throughout the history of creative ethical innovation, most if not all of the inventors have lost their souls to their own creations. However, most of the inventors could never have imagined the price that their innovations would exact from their children and grandchildren. Lot's lot was not any different. Lot might have retained a semblance of Avraham's teachings; however, his daughters only knew the ways of Sodom. Lot's wife was a daughter of Sodom and her five daughters were her citizens. Nevertheless, Lot did have a modicum of success. His oldest daughter, Palotis, proved to be righteous and was killed by Sodom because of her charitable acts. Lot's second and third daughters married into prominent Sodomite families and refused to escape with Lot from the destruction of Sodom. The two youngest daughters were still unmarried when the angels appeared and they were the ones who survived with their father.

I would like to suggest that Lot did attempt to teach his children to be better than their environment. However, in his own need to be independent of Avraham and the relative restrictiveness of his teachings, Lot denied his children their most important heritage, their ancestry. Lot never told his children that they were the nieces of the greatest living human. Lot never told his daughters that their aunt was the greatest living prophet. Lot never told his children that true human dignity in the image of G-d was alive and well in the tent of Avraham and Sarah.

Lot's daughters had been raised to believe that Lot was the most righteous person alive. Therefore, Lot's moral compromises became their moral compass. If their father decided that the safety of two strangers was worth the price of their virtue, they accepted his decision as moral and proper. Likewise, when they were saved from Sodom they believed that their salvation was in Lot's merit, not as we know, because of the merit of Avraham and Sarah.

Children learn far more from their parents than the parents wish to admit. Children have the unique ability to sense and imbibe the underlying philosophy and character of their parents. Therefore, in addition to imitating Lot's actions, the daughters learned to innovate on his teachings. Lot's own inclination toward challenging the standard allowed his daughters to do the same. They did not ask their father because they sensed that he might be reluctant to tread where only devils play. They knew his basic commitment to some elements of the seven Mitzvos and assumed that he would refuse to join them in their "noble" task of incest. (Of course! He knew that the world had not been completely destroyed! He knew that Avraham and Sarah had certainly been saved! He knew he had no excuse for incest!) They believed that they were truly the only ones alive because they never knew that the likes of Avraham and Sarah existed. Therefore, they decided for themselves and included Lot, seemingly without his consent.

In truth, Lot's own reluctance toward incest was far less than his daughters imagined. Had he been the true rebel, even that moral barrier would have fallen beneath the onslaught of Sodom's influence. Incest was commonplace in Sodom and Lot had spoken against it in the privacy of his home. However, children have a way of reading between the lines and his moral waffling was less than convincing. Therefore, his daughters sensed that they could "sway" their father by reducing his culpability. As Rashi 19:33 points out, "Lot knew what had happened the first night with his first daughter and did nothing to avoid the situation with the second daughter."

There are many lessons to be learnt from the story of Sodom. However, the importance of environment, heritage, and proper role modeling in the education of our children is one of the most important.

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