

"OLD JEW OR "NEW JEW"

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah always deals with real life, with current assessments and realities. In fact, much of the current pattern and modern story of the Jewish people is reflected in the Torah reading of Vayera, especially in the story of Avraham and his nephew, Lot. Lot sees Avraham as being old-fashioned, irrelevant and a definite handicap to the establishment of the new and better worldview. Lot sees the realization of this better world in the newly burgeoning society of Sodom. He ignores the intrinsic evil of that society and builds his hopes on the superficial wealth and glitter that Sodom exudes. He is convinced that his uncle Avraham, childless and old, has no future, while he, with his large family, immense wealth, and the seeming respect of the society of Sodom, will live on and become the new Avraham.

In our century a large segment of Jewry convinced itself that the old Avraham was done for, and in their eyes, deservedly so. Orthodoxy and a Torah life-style and value system were doomed to be relegated to the ash-heap of history. The "new Jew" would be cultured, modernized, secularized, reformed, and "free" of the burdens of Torah law and the Jewish past. He would be a Socialist, a Communist, a Humanist, a secular Zionist, but he would be Lot and not Avraham. And if that meant taking upon Jewish society some of the trappings of Sodom, well, so be it. For after all, it was impossible to remain with the world-view and way of life of the old Avraham.

However, Sodom did not turn out to be the paradise that Lot hoped for. Lot's children, raised and educated in Sodom, ridiculed and despised Lot, much as Lot had himself ridiculed and despised Avraham. They resented Lot's old-fashioned attachment to the outmoded ideas of Avraham, of hospitality and kindness to others, even to strangers. Lot's own family turned against him and informed on him to the authorities and people of Sodom. Lot was the precursor of the Jewish Communists in the Stalin era, who turned in their parents for being "counter-revolutionaries", only to be eliminated a decade later by the "great father Stalin." And, worst of all, Sodom was destroyed! The whole brave new world collapsed in fire and brimstone, poverty and death, disappointment and disillusion.

All of the beliefs of the modern Jew in the better world of European culture and modernity were crushed by the Holocaust, by Stalin and his successors, by the unending trials by fire of the State of Israel. Lot remained alone, unable any longer to return to Avraham, sunk in the incestuous wallowing of his own emptiness of spirit and lack of vision. Meanwhile Avraham somehow miraculously survived and even prospered. He had a son and heir, Yitzchak, and he had a spiritual foundation for

his being, and the Lord protected him (albeit barely) from his enemies. Lot is bankrupt and the old, irrelevant Avraham waxed richer and richer. That is a pretty fair description of today's Jewish world. The outstanding feature of today's Jewish world is the contrast between the resiliency and confidence of Orthodoxy and the angst and depression that characterizes the non-Orthodox Jewish world. Avraham grows strong and mighty while Lot destroys himself.

But all is not lost for Lot. Hundreds of years later, long after Sodom has been transformed into salt and sulfur and ashes, a descendant of Lot, Ruth of Moab, seeks out Avraham. She forsakes her home and her family, her opportunity for physical comforts and a seemingly secure existence, and sets out on a difficult road that will bring her to Avraham's people and make her the mother of kings. Somewhere within Lot there was a spark of Avraham that was not extinguished by the experience of Sodom. Ruth discovered that spark within herself and that discovery gave her no rest. She rebuilds her life and her own person under the shadow of Avraham's canopy.

There are thousands of descendants of Lot-Jews throughout the world today who are searching for Avraham. They go against family and society and ignore the cluck-clucking platitudes of the professionals of the Jewish world, all in order to reunite themselves with Avraham, with Torah, and with the Jewish past and destiny. Sodom is destroyed, but Lot "who went with Avraham" emerges, even after centuries of separation and self-hate, to take his place once again alongside his uncle in the struggle for Godliness and sanctity. Is this not a description of our world and our times?

Shabat Shalom.
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