

NO BUSINESS AS USUAL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Lech Lecha

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Good Shabbos!*

Lot Traces His 'Lineage' To His Property

The parsha contains an 'awkwardly written' verse: "They took Lot and his property, the nephew of Avram, and they went and Lot was living at this time in Sodom" [Bereshis 14:12]. A grammar teacher would have a field day, because the sentence contains a misplaced modifier. The 'correct' way to write this sentence would seem to be "They took Lot, the nephew of Avram, and his property..." What is the Torah trying to convey by constructing the sentence in this seemingly awkward fashion?

The Beis Av cites an interesting incident in order to explain the pasuk [verse]. During World War Two, his family fled their home in Europe, and made their way to Vienna. Many other Eastern European refugees also arrived, fleeing the Nazis. Later, there was a rumor that the S.S. was about to enter Vienna. The Beis Av's father decided to leave, even though it meant leaving everything behind. Many of the other refugees, however, tried to dissuade him, telling him that things would be alright and urging him not to cause a panic by fleeing again. The Beis Av's father refused to listen to their arguments and was determined to leave, even if it was only with the shirt on his back.

Their family left everything behind in Vienna, and survived. Those who remained in Vienna, as history proved, were taken away to concentration camps and killed. They lost not only their property, but their lives as well. What prevented the other people from leaving? They did not leave because they would have had to leave their property behind. When faced with the specter of losing either their

lives or their life's savings, people sometimes try to convince themselves that everything will turn out well. They use various irrational rationalizations to avoid giving up their property.

As strange as this may seem, the Talmud says that to some individuals, their "money is more dear to them than their lives" [Brachos 61b]. This is the reason for the awkward sentence structure -- to teach us that Lot was such an individual.

In order to strengthen this interpretation, we may ask further: Why does this pasuk add "and Lot was living in Sodom"? We already knew that Lot was living in Sodom! The answer is related to the reason why Lot was in Sodom in the first place. There were opportunities in Sodom. One could make a good living in Sodom. "It was fertile" [Bereshis 13:10]. Lot wanted to have a nice living. He wanted to make money. This was perhaps the defining aspect of his character -- this verse is telling us what Lot was all about. So when the pasuk mentions Lot, it emphasizes: "Lot and his property, the nephew of Avram." He was first and foremost associated with his money. That, in his mind, was his 'yichus' (lineage). That is what he was proud of. Only as an afterthought was he also "the nephew of Avram." The pasuk adds, "...he was living in Sodom" -- in order to emphasize the point that the reason why he was there in the first place was because he was drawn there by the economy and the opportunity for easy living.

As hard as people may work for their money, they must keep things in perspective. There are priorities in life. Unfortunately in the worst of circumstances people sometimes mix up those priorities. Thousands of people have paid the ultimate price for that mistake.

No "Business As Usual" In A Morally Corrupt Society

Perhaps the over-riding theme of the entire book of Bereshis is "ma'aseh avos siman l'banim" ["the actions of the fathers foreshadows what will happen to their children"]. On one level, this concept is like a prophecy or a 'blueprint'. One who wishes to know what will happen to the Jewish people can look in the book of Bereshis and thereby glean insight into history.

But it means more than that. It also means that our strength, as a nation, to endure that which we have experienced as a people, comes to us by virtue of the fact that our Patriarchs experienced it first. If an Avraham Avinu went down to Egypt and survived, if a Yaakov Avinu went into exile and was able to survive, this made an impression on their souls. As a people, we share their souls. Consequently, the impression that those activities made on our collective souls gave us the strength to endure what we have had to endure as a people. This is the deeper meaning of "ma'aseh avos siman l'banim".

In this week's portion, Avram Avinu went down to Egypt. Our Sages tell us that Egypt was a land that was permeated with sexual immorality. It was a land that was morally bankrupt. The fact that Avram Avinu survived enabled his descendants to have spiritual strength to endure the later trials and tribulations of the Egyptian exile.

However, we learn something else from Avram Avinu. When Avram saw that he was going down to a land that was immersed in immorality, he took action. He realized that he could not conduct his life "business as usual" under those circumstances. He therefore told Sarai, "Please say that you are my sister..." [Bereshis 12:13]. Avram realized that when one is in a land that is immersed in immorality, one must institute special enactments and plan special defenses to deal with the threatening situation.

Regrettably, America has become a land that is immersed in sexual immorality. Things are said in the national media that one would not have dreamt of uttering in public 30 years ago, let alone broadcasting them, quite literally, in front of the whole country. This is the society in which we live. Today, you cannot open a newspaper without being assaulted!

There was recently an article in Business Week that documented how advertisers have relaxed standards. The mass media uses print advertisements to promote products that it would have been unimaginable to publicly promote ten years ago. One cannot stand in the checkout line of a supermarket today without being hit by it. A man in Glen Burnie, MD, petitioned the local Giant grocery store. He asked that just as there are checkout aisles in which candy is not sold, there should be checkout aisles that do not sell tabloids and other offensive magazines.

It is hard for us to say it. This is a wonderful country and it has been wonderful for the Jews, but the country has literally lost its moral bearing. The liberties that the society takes regarding how men talk and act with women in social settings and in the work place -- these are literally not things that morally upright individuals can do.

The "ma'aseh avos siman l'banim" of this Torah portion is that when one knows that he is in such a society, life cannot be "business as usual". Each of us must carefully think about this issue, and decide how can we protect ourselves. But something must be done. Unfortunately, we live in a spiritually hostile society and we cannot continue with "business as usual".

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Lech Lecha are provided below:

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- Tape # 119 - Conversion for Ulterior Motives
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