

# THE PERSON WHO CONQUERS HIS NATURAL INSTINCTS

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1006 - "I'm Mochel You" -- Do You Really Have To Mean It?" Good Shabbos!

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During the process in which the Almighty destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Amora, the Torah teaches, "And so it was when G-d destroyed the cities of the plain, that G-d remembered Avraham; so he sent Lot from amidst the upheaval when He overturned the cities in which Lot had lived." [Bereishis 19:29] Lot was saved from the destruction of Sodom, but the Torah seems to teach that it was only because Hashem remembered Avraham that He decided to save Lot.

Rashi comments on what it was that Hashem remembered: Hashem remembered that Lot kept quiet in Egypt when Avraham told the Egyptians that Sarah was his sister, rather than admitting that she was his wife. Lot did not "squeal" on his uncle. It was this "merit" that caused Hashem to allow Lot to be rescued from Sodom.

The commentaries on Rashi are bothered by several points. The Maharal in Gur Aryeh argues that the simple interpretation of the *pasuk*, "Hashem remembered Avraham" is that G-d remembered that Avraham loved Lot. Avraham already risked his life to save Lot in the war of the Four Kings against the Five Kings. Clearly, Avraham would be greatly anguished if Lot was wiped out during the destruction of Sodom. According to the Maharal, this is the simple interpretation of the words "Hashem remembered Avraham."

Furthermore, Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi asks, if Rashi is seeking sources for Lot's merit, why does he choose to mention the fact that Lot did not squeal on his uncle in Egypt? Rashi should have pointed out that Lot had merit for leaving his homeland and his birthplace to follow Avraham when the latter journeyed to the unknown destination in accordance with the Almighty's command. Remember -- Lot left Charan. He went with Avraham Avinu. The Torah considers this a very big deal. Why does Rashi not say that Lot was saved in the merit of following Avraham?

The Maharal, in answering these questions, writes what he calls a very big *sod* [secret mystical teaching]. "The merit that Lot had, for which he was saved -- namely he did not reveal to the Egyptians that Sarah was really Avraham's wife -- contains hidden meaning, which is one of the Torah's secrets." I cannot fully explain the Maharal because I do not really understand his

explanation about "the Torah's secrets." However, it is clear that the Maharal is saying that the reason Lot was saved in the merit of keeping quiet was because through that action "Lot gained a connection and a relationship with Avraham" (*Tzeeruf v'Yichus l'Avraham*). This connection that Lot established with Avraham Avinu saved his life. By keeping quiet at that moment, he earned protection in the future via this newfound "partnership" with Avraham.

The Maharal explains his understanding of the "connection" Lot established with Avraham, and I encourage everyone to study this Maharal and see what they can gain from it. I, however, want to share an insight on this matter that I heard from the present-day Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim, Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg, shlit"a, which I believe is a brilliant analysis and a tremendous insight into human psychology.

The Mishna says in Avos that anyone who possesses the following three qualities is among the disciples of Avraham Avinu: A "good eye" (i.e., a generous person); a "humble spirit"; and a "nefesh shefeilah" (which we will explain presently). The Maharal in Avos elaborates: Every human being is born as a "stingy-eyed person" possessing the characteristic of "I want to have, and I do not want you to have." This is a terrible attribute, but you should know that we all have this attribute. We were all born with it! Furthermore, we were all born with tremendous egos (the opposite of a "humble spirit") and it is a life's work to try and gain a little humility. Finally, we are all born -- says the Maharal -- with a "*nefesh rechava*" (opposite of "*nefesh shefeilah*"). We all want the whole world. We have insatiable appetites. There is an old Yiddish saying -- all babies come into this world with their fists clenched, as if to say, we want to have it all. That is how we come into the world -- miserly, egotistical, and with insatiable appetites for all the pleasures of this world.

Avraham Avinu conquered his natural inclination and managed to emulate the opposite of all three of these natural characteristics. He was a "*tov ayin*" -- a giving and generous person. (It is hard to find an equivalent English translation for the expression "*tov ayin*", but there is a Yiddish expression which captures it -- to *fargin*. *Fargin* means **I** am happy for **your** success. This concept is so difficult to translate into other languages, that in modern Hebrew there is a verb called *l'fargain* which means to *fargin*! To accomplish this attribute -- "*tov ayin* / the ability to *fargin*".) Avraham Avinu had to overcome his nature.

Likewise, Avraham Avinu was born with an ego, but he overcame it. He developed a "*ruach nemucha*" -- a humble spirit. Finally, Avraham Avinu was born -- like we all were -- with an insatiable appetite, but he refined himself and developed a "*nefesh shefeilah*". These were his spiritual accomplishments in life.

Note -- the Mishna does not say about the person who introduced monotheism to the world that whoever is a believer is a disciple of Avraham Avinu. No, being a believer alone does not qualify a person as a disciple of Avraham Avinu. The characteristic that makes a person into a disciple of Avraham Avinu is the capacity to rule over his inborn inclinations. Doing something which overrules

a person's nature is what makes a person a true disciple of the Patriarch Avraham.

The Maharal says that Lot established a "linkage" with Avraham Avinu for which he merited being saved from Sodom's destruction. In order to become connected to Avraham Avinu, a person must demonstrate some type of rule over his natural inclinations. He needs to show he can dominate his own natural instincts.

Lot was not such a righteous individual. In fact, Rashi explains that the reason Lot was instructed by the angels not to look back when fleeing Sodom was because he was no better than the Sodomites, and was only being saved in Avraham's merit. Therefore, he was not worthy to enjoy seeing other people's destruction while he escaped, given the fact that he was as bad as they were.

Lot had all the same lusts as the Sodomites, so how did he demonstrate that he was like the disciples of Avraham Avinu? The Tolner Rebbe says that Lot demonstrated this by conquering one of the great *taivos* and *yetzer haras* (i.e., overcoming an almost universal human temptation): He overcame the great temptation of revealing a secret.

What happens when someone tells you "I want to tell you something that is top secret, but I do not want you to tell it to another soul"? Typically, your mouth burns up with the confidential information: I need to tell this to somebody! Do we not all find ourselves in that situation?

Why is there such an evil inclination to tell secrets? The Tolner Rebbe says -- and this is the truth -- we want to tell secrets because it means "I am a some-body. I am not a no-body." I have information that someone else needs and wants. I am needed to provide this secret information. Nobody wants to be a nobody. There is thus a great lust to share information that is not available to another party.

The Tolner Rebbe invites us to picture the scene: Avraham arrives in Egypt. It is a big deal. Everybody is talking about this distinguished visitor from Canaan. Lot goes into a restaurant or a bar and everybody is talking about Avraham Avinu and about the beautiful sister who arrived with him. Lot is sitting there thinking to himself "Sister? Hah! I know the truth!" Lot has a tremendous urge to shout out, "You fools! He sold you a bill of goods. She is not his sister. She is his wife! She is his Rebbetzin!"

Lot does not do that. He keeps quiet. He maintains a poker face. Silence. There is no greater conquest of a person's natural inclination than this. With that, he became linked to Avraham Avinu. The identifying mark of a disciple of Avraham Avinu is one who can conquer his natural instincts, his desires. This was Lot's achievement, and this was his source of merit.

Lot was not saved by the fact that he welcomed guests into his home in Sodom. Lot did learn hospitality from living in the household of Avraham, but that does not demonstrate conquest of his evil inclination. Hosting guests demonstrates kindness but being able to keep quiet in the face of overwhelming temptation to "be a some-body" and spill the beans -- that demonstrates a person

ruling over his baser instincts. That demonstrates being a true partner and disciple of Avraham Avinu.

The Tolner Rebbe brings from Kabbalistic tradition that the *neshama* of Lot, later (through the process of *Gilgul Neshamos* -- transmigration of souls), became the *neshama* of Yehudah, the son of Yaakov Avinu. Then, in subsequent generations, it transmigrated further and became the *neshama* of Boaz, the husband of Rus.

The Tolner Rebbe elaborates: Where do we find another person who went against the temptation of every sinew in his body, and did something about which his natural inclination was advising him "Do not do this"? Yehudah the son of Yaakov. When Tamar was accused of being unfaithful, Yehudah knew the truth (that he impregnated her). However, it was so embarrassing. He could have kept silent. Nevertheless, he publicly admits, "She is more righteous than I." This demonstrated a powerful conquest of his natural inclination.

This attribute that started with Lot was not yet perfected by Lot. His soul needed a further *tikun* [improvement]. It achieved further *tikun* in the body of Yehudah, but it still was not finished. With Boaz, the *neshama* reached its final pinnacle.

What did Boaz do? Boaz found himself alone with Rus in the tent at night. A young woman is at his feet. The Medrash relates that the *Yetzer Hara* came to him, grabbed him by the throat and said to him "she is unmarried; you are unmarried; what is the problem? Go ahead!" He firmly resolved that he would take no action that night, because the Rabbis forbade sexual relations even between unmarried parties without betrothal and marriage. This required incredible conquest of his inclination. This is where Lot's *neshama* reached its final *tikun*.

The Tolner Rebbe concluded by citing an amazing Medrash. The Medrash teaches that prior to the establishment of the system of reading weekly Torah portions from consecutive sections of the Torah, the original custom was to read "the section of Lot" every Shabbos. What does this mean? The Matnos Kehunah explains that the section of Lot (including his incestuous relations with his daughters) is about *arayos* [forbidden relations] and *arayos* are such a powerful lust that it is important to constantly be warned against them. This is a difficult explanation because there are many other Biblical portions that warn much more explicitly against forbidden sexual relationships. What then is the meaning of the Medrash?

The Tolner Rebbe gives his own explanation. The Gemara says that Rav Shimon bar Yochai's mother talked a lot. Rav Shimon went to his mother and, in the politest manner, told her, "Mother, it was with great difficulty that the Rabbis allowed one to say 'Shabbos Shalom' on Shabbos". In other words, the Rabbis frowned on excessive conversation on Shabbos and it was only with great difficulty that they allowed even the exchange of "Good Shabbos" greetings with one another. Shabbos is meant to be a day for the soul, not for the body. Shabbos can seem like the greatest day to schmooze because we have so much time on our hands. However, Rav Shimon Bar Yochai told his elderly

mother that she should conquer her *yetzer hara* to talk, by speaking less on Shabbos.

Where do we find someone in the Torah who conquered his evil inclination to talk? It was Lot, as explained earlier. The Tolner Rebbe says this is why the Medrash teaches that they used to read Parshas Lot every single Shabbos -- to teach us that we should be able to overcome the tremendous *Yetzer Hara* that we have to schmooze, even when the schmoozing is fundamentally permitted, but still, "with difficulty they allowed the greeting of 'Shabbos Shalom' on Shabbos.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayeira is provided below:

- # 029 - Mila and the "Yellow" Baby
- # 071 - Last Will & Testament of R. Yehuda Hachasid.
- # 120 - After Milchigs: How Long a Wait?
- # 167 - The Bris Milah Seudah
- # 213 - Is lying ever Permitted?
- # 257 - Makom Kavuah and Other Davening Issues
- # 303 - Milk and Eggs in Halacha
- # 347 - Women and the Laws of Tznius
- # 391 - The Mitzvah of Nichum Aveilim
- # 435 - Declining a Kibud
- # 479 - Mitzvah of Inviting Guests
- # 523 - Walking by a Person Who Is Davening
- # 567 - Asking and Giving Mechila
- # 611 - Shalom Aleichem on Friday Night
- # 655 - The Bris Milah Seudah - Fleishigs or Milchig?
- # 699 - Zichrona L'vracha, Sh'lita and Neru - For Whom?
- # 743 - Chazoras Hashatz - More Important Than You Think
- #787 - Tefilah—Guaranteeing Success
- # 831 - Hagomel for Elective Surgery
- # 875 - Visiting the Sick - Are 2 Better Than 1? and Other Issues
- # 919 - Bas Mitzvah Celebrations - Kosher or Not?

- # 962 - Hard Cheese: Hot Dog After Pizza -- Is There A Problem?
- #1006 - "I'm Mochel You" -- Do You Really Have To Mean It?"
- #1050 - Saying No to A Rosh Yeshiva / To Your Host?
- #1136 - Must You Start Shmoneh Esrai Exactly With Tzibbur?
- #1179 - I Have A Toothache/Headache/Cold – Do I Still Have To Daven?
- #1267 - Inviting Your Next Door Neighbor for Shabbos: Is that called Hachnosas Orchim?

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