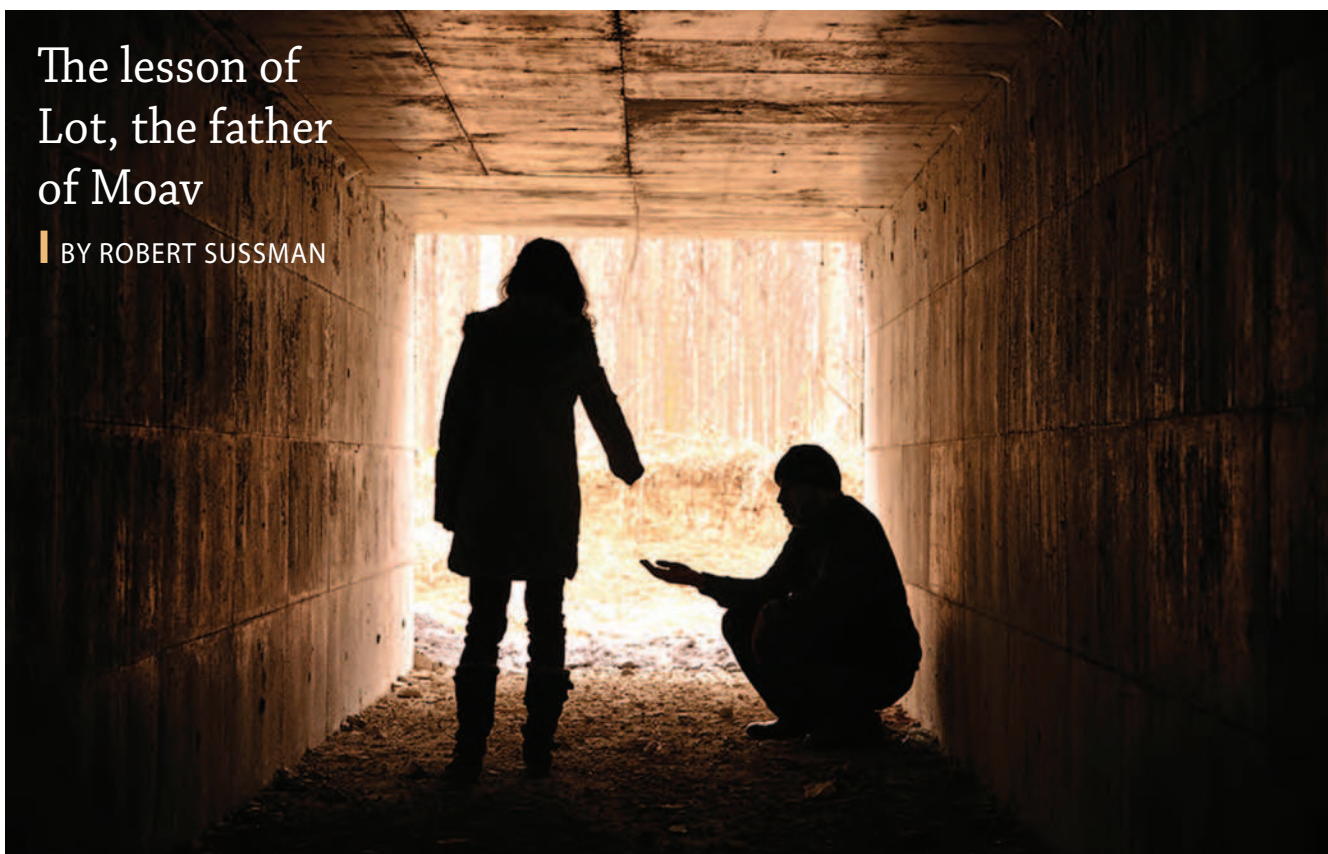


The Torah is not ALL OR NOTHING

The lesson of
Lot, the father
of Moav

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



LOT, THE BROTHER¹ OF SARAH IMEINU (OUR Matriarch) and the nephew² and brother-in-law of Avraham Avinu (our Patriarch), was not exactly what we would call a role model.

Although Lot left Charan with Avraham and Sarah when Avraham was famously given the instruction from Hashem to *lech lecha*³ – “to go for yourself”, when he and Avraham eventually parted ways, Lot freely and gladly chose to live in the city of Sedom⁴. Our Sages teach that Lot was not interested in Avraham or in his G-d.⁵ And, Lot actually chose to live in Sedom because he was attracted to the wealth and the immorality⁶ that he saw there. Such

was Lot’s attachment to material possessions that he actually hesitated to flee from Sedom⁷ when it was being destroyed, because he desired to save his belongings⁸ and not just his life. And such was his depraved sense of morality that in an effort to save guests, who were staying in his home, from the evil intentions of a crowd of Sedomites, who demanded that those guests be brought out and subjected to abuse, that he actually offered his own daughters to the Sedomite mob in place of those guests.⁹ And ultimately, this depraved sense of morality even led Lot to have relations with both of his daughters (at least one of which, knowingly¹⁰) – and

from one of these relations, Moav, comes the lineage of the Moshiach via Ruth!

From the way our Sages describe Sedom¹¹, it was a perfect fit for a man like Lot. The moral compass of the place was not just broken; it was completely and utterly twisted – akin to living in the Twilight Zone. If a person brought a claim against his neighbour for striking his wife and causing her to miscarry, the judge would inform the claimant that he had to give his wife to his neighbour until such time that the neighbour impregnated his wife! If a person brought a claim against his neighbour for cutting off the ear of his donkey, the judge would inform the claim-

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ant that he had to give the donkey to his neighbour until such time that the ear of the donkey grew back! If a person brought a claim against his neighbour for striking and wounding him, the judge would inform the claimant that it was he, the claimant, who, in fact, owed his neighbour a fee for having provided him a valuable health service: bloodletting!

So, what precisely did the morally-challenged Lot do to deserve being saved from the complete and utter destruction of Sedom – saved from this Twilight Zone universe in which he had willingly chosen to live, knowing full well the inhabitants of the place behaved wickedly and sinfully¹² in the eyes of G-d? A G-d in whom, as we have noted, Lot had no real interest.

The traditional answer offered by our Sages is that Lot was saved because of his silence.¹³ The Torah states¹⁴ that “...when G-d destroyed the cities of the plain, G-d remembered Avraham, and He sent Lot out of the upheaval”. Our Sages ask¹⁵ the obvious question: What was it that G-d remembered? And they answer: G-d remembered that Lot had remained silent when Avraham had passed off Sarah as his sister¹⁶ – and, as a consequence, Avraham reaped tremendous material benefits¹⁷ that were rightfully due to Sarah’s real brother: Lot. For a man of Lot’s character, just keeping his mouth shut was something which was deserving of reward!

I would like to suggest another reason Lot deserved to be saved from Sedom – a reason intimately rooted in what ultimately led to Sedom being slated for annihilation by G-d.

When the angel responsible for saving Lot instructed him¹⁸: “Do not look back,” Rashi explains¹⁹ that what the angel was saying to Lot was: “You did evil along with them (ie, the inhabitants of Sedom) and

(only) in the z’chus (merit) of Avraham are you being saved!” How can Rashi say it was in the z’chus of Avraham that Lot was being saved? Although a son can bring a z’chus to his father, it’s debateable²⁰ whether the reverse is true – and Lot was not even Avraham’s son!

Although Lot had abandoned Avraham and his G-d, Rashi tells us that Lot had never forgotten one of the principal lessons he had learned in Avraham’s home – one of the hallmarks of the home of Avraham and Sarah: to seek out guests and care for them.²¹ I think a case can be made that it was in this z’chus of Avraham – in the z’chus of the lesson that Lot had learned from Avraham that Lot deserved to be saved. And we even see that the angels who came to Sedom (the one on a mission to destroy the city and the other on a mission to save Lot) actually gave Lot the opportunity to perform this very mitzvah of showing hospitality to guests²² – only revealing their respective missions to Lot (and commencing with the carrying out of those missions) after Lot had managed to convince them to come to his home and be his guests.²³

Although Lot was clearly influenced by his neighbours, the one area where he apparently deviated was in opening his home to guests. The people of Sedom had a very different approach towards guests. Our Sages tell us²⁴ that Sedom had a special bed that was set aside just for guests. But, woe to anyone who found himself in need of hospitality in Sedom, as the in-

habitants had sort of a demented Goldilocks approach to making their guests feel “just right”: if the guest was too tall for this special bed, then they would cut him to fit; and if the guest was too short, then they would stretch him until he fit, thereby creating the marketing pitch: “one size fits all”!

So, too, the people of Sedom had their own unique approach to dealing with the poor²⁵: if a poor person (by some grave misfortune) happened to find his way to their city, each person would give the poor person a dinar (coin) on which would be inscribed the name of the donor. Unfortunately, however, no one would give the man (or seemingly sell the man) anything to eat! When the poor person eventually died as a result of his hunger and malnutrition, each of the donors would come and take back the dinar that he had given the man, which could be easily identified by the inscription that had been placed on the coin.

So, what exactly was the final straw for Sedom? Our Sages tell us²⁶ there was a certain girl (literally: ribah) who would secretly give bread to the poor, hiding it in her jug so as not to draw attention to her benevolent actions. Unfortunately, her kindness to the poor became revealed. So how would we expect such a meritorious deed to be rewarded in the twisted world of Sedom? Ribah was smeared with honey and made to stand on top of a wall, at which point bees came and devoured her – not merely a death sentence, but a slow and incredibly painful death sentence! The Torah informs²⁷ us that the outcry from Sedom had become so great that Hashem took notice: “And Hashem said: the cry of Sedom and Amora, it is ribah (great)...” – our Sages, however, read this pasuk (verse) differently, attributing the outcry to this very incident: “...the cry of Sedom and Amora, it is Ribah (a girl)...” The cry of Ribah – the cry of a girl whose only

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“crime” was *chesed* (kindness) towards other human beings – was the final straw for Hashem. Once Sedom had reached such a point, there was evidently nothing more that could be done.

Lot not only risked his life to protect his guests from an unruly mob, but as we see from the incident with Ribah, he literally risked his life by doing such an act of *chesed* at all! As evidenced by the guest beds available in Sedom, guests were to be discouraged and, when possible, eliminated. What happened to Ribah, however, was a new low – even for a place like Sedom, as they had reached a point of no return, where those who extended *chesed* to others would be permanently prevented from ever doing so again and in a way that would clearly discourage others from mimicking such acts. Part of the point of punishing wrongdoers is to serve as a lesson to others not to make those same mistakes.

Although the Sedomites saw *chesed* as being deserving of death – like everything in that city, they managed to get things entirely backwards. The Talmud teaches²⁸: “When a poor man comes, be quick to offer him bread, so that others may be quick to offer it to your children.” Thereafter, the Talmud explains: “And He (ie, G-d) will give you mercy, and be merciful to you, and multiply you,”²⁹ as whoever is merciful to others, mercy is shown to him by Heaven, while

whoever is not merciful to others, mercy is not shown to him by Heaven.” This touches on the fundamental principle of *middah-keneged-middah* – measure-for-measure – when someone shows concern for others, has mercy on them, then Hashem shows concern for him and has mercy on him! Lot’s behaviour towards guests – especially in a place like Sedom, where such an activity amounted to being a high crime against the state – merited that Hashem should show mercy towards him. Avraham taught Lot what turned out to be, quite literally, a life-saving lesson – to seek out guests, to shelter them, to feed them, and to care for them. And it was as a result of this *z’chus* of Avraham – this lesson that Lot learned in the house of Avraham – that he merited to be saved: because Lot was merciful to others, Hashem, in turn, had mercy on him!

We often think of people in extremes – as all good or all bad – saints or sinners. It’s easier for our brains to process things as black and white than as grey, a mixture of black and white. But such a viewpoint is not a Torah perspective. Life is not all or nothing. However inconvenient a truth it may be, people, with extremely great exceptions, are neither purely good nor purely evil. As we see from Lot, a person can have significant personal failings and incredibly depraved desires; a person can actually abandon G-d entirely, choosing to live

among the worst-of-the-worst, and even, in large part, emulate their behaviour, and yet that same person can have an affinity for even a single mitzvah – and that single mitzvah can be enough to save a person’s life! Every mitzvah is precious and every mitzvah carries with it a reward. The lesson of Lot is that mitzvos are not all or nothing – everything counts – and the bad things that we may do, *chas v’shalom*, do not cancel out whatever good we may do, however seemingly insignificant and even insincere that good might be. ■

¹See Bereishis 11:27, 29, Sarah, aka Ischah, was the daughter of Haran, who was also the father of Lot

²See Bereishis 11:27, Haran was Avraham’s brother, making Sarah and Lot his niece and nephew

³See Bereishis 12:4

⁴See Bereishis 13:12

⁵See Rashi on Bereishis 13:11, d”h *mik-edem*

⁶See Rashi on Bereishis 13:10, d”h *bo’acha tzo’ar*, citing Bereishis Rabbah 41:7; and Rashi on Bereishis 13:13, d”h *v’anshei sedom ra’im*

⁷See Bereishis 19:16

⁸See Rashi on Bereishis 19:16, d”h *vuyisma’mah* and Rashi on Bereishis 19:17, d”h *himaleit al nafshecha*

⁹See Bereishis 19:4-8

¹⁰See Rashi on Bereishis 19:33, d”h *uv’kumah*

¹¹Sanhedrin 109b

¹²See Bereishis 13:13

¹³See Rashi on Bereishis 19:29 citing Bereishis Rabbah 51:6

¹⁴Bereishis 19:29

¹⁵Rashi on Bereishis 19:29 citing Bereishis Rabbah 51:6

¹⁶See Bereishis 12:13

¹⁷See Bereishis 12:16

¹⁸Bereishis 19:17

¹⁹D”h *al tabit acharecha*

²⁰Cf. Sanhedrin 104a and Yuma 87a

²¹See Rashi on Bereishis 19:1, d”h *vuyar lot*

²²See Ahavas Chesed, where the Chofetz Chaim includes the mitzvah of *hachnosas orchim* under the general category of *chesed* – and notes that a person receives the same rewards for fulfilling this aspect of *chesed* as he would for fulfilling any other act of *chesed*.

²³See Bereishis 19:1-13

²⁴Sanhedrin 109b

²⁵Sanhedrin 109b

²⁶Sanhedrin 109b

²⁷Bereishis 18:20

²⁸Shabbos 151b

²⁹Devarim 13:18