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פרשת וירא
Parshat Vayeira

Ashreinu | אשרינו

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion

True Chesed

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Elyada Shabtai ('23)

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Amid narratives that portray the *chesed* and *kedusha* of Avraham, Lot appears as a disturbing yet enigmatic figure. His uniquely disconcerting actions compel us to ask the question: what profound meaning can be discerned by Lot's reprehensible behavior and looming presence throughout Parshat Vayeira?

A remarkable approach is developed by Rabbi Moshe Miller, a former rebbe at KYHS, in his book "Rising Moon." In this sefer, Rabbi Miller presents Lot as a key figure, one whose behaviors and progeny will connect Adam and Chava to Ruth and Boaz.

According to Rabbi Miller, our understanding of Lot begins not in Ur or even Sodom, but in Gan Eden. Chava allows herself to be seduced by the *nachash's* specious argument that Hashem's intentions in withholding the *eitz hada'at* are to maintain control and dominion over her. Hashem's subsequent curse is *midah k'neged midah*, that Chava indeed be subject to control and power dynamics in marriage. Adam, after eating from the fruit, internalizes what is referred to as *nahama d'kisufa*, the bread of shame. *Chesed* in this world will forevermore have a paradoxical nature—the potential to make the recipient feel not loved and supported but rather inferior and diminished. Thus, Adam reacts to Hashem's inquiry, "where are you," with a passive rebelliousness towards his wife and towards God. Examined together, Chava and Adam's responses toward Hashem's beneficence can be characterized as rejection of mutuality in relationships, as the incapacity to trust in the sincerity of love. Marriage, meant to be the beatific union of two complementary *neshamot* and the means toward achieving a deepening relationship with Hashem, will now be fractured—intimacy, spirituality, and mutual love no longer intertwined. In Parshat Vayeira, Lot's behaviors continue the motifs of broken relationships and the "bread of shame" begun in Bereishit. Like Adam who felt resentment toward Hashem, Lot comes to experience his uncle's endless kindnesses as stultifying and demeaning, sees himself subsequently as indebted and diminished, and erroneously comes to believe he can only achieve selfhood by rejecting Avraham and all the philosophies Avraham embodies. In his attempt to escape the bread of shame, Lot journeys away. To where? The direction away from Gan Eden, to Sodom, the very epitome of a dark, libertarian, survival-of-the-fittest environment that rejects emotional intimacy. Lot's horrific willingness to sacrifice his daughters to appease the brutal Sodomite masses is in direct antithesis to the *akeida*,

where we see Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as the ultimate act of love, self-sacrifice, and *kedusha*.
The seeds of Lot's redemption, and arguably the purpose of his role in the Torah, are intimated in his final, morally ambiguous moments. Believing the world has been destroyed, Lot degenerates into drunkenness, but his daughters seek the perpetuation of life—and engage him in the Torah's first act of "*yibum*"—from which comes Ruth and the dynasty of Mashiach. According to Rabbi Miller, it is Lot's descendant Ruth who will illuminate and rectify not only his sins, but those of Adam and Chava as well. Lot, like Adam and Chava before him, had rejected covenantal relationships predicated on interdependence and thus had ushered into the fabric of the world a self-defeating sense of shame intertwined with *chesed*. Lot's descendant Ruth will ultimately heal this fracture. Through her loving *chesed* toward her first husband Machlon, Boaz, and Naomi, all the while maintaining her dignity and self worth, Ruth manages to disconnect shame from *chesed*, thereby shattering the Edenic curse that marriages will be subject to power dynamics. Rather, she demonstrates what her ancestor Lot's failures highlighted in the negative—that we are meant to achieve purpose and joy through an interdependent, mutual, loving relationship with Hashem, one in which our *avoda* and Hashem's *chesed* are not perceived as constraining or diminishing, but rather as elevating, enlarging and meaningful.

Parsha Summary

1- Hashem visited Avraham after his *brit milah*. Avraham noticed three men passing by, and invited them to his tent. Avraham and Sarah prepared a big meal for the men, who were really angels in disguise. They told Avraham that Sarah would have a baby in a year, even though she was 89 years old. She laughed, and Hashem got upset that she did not believe it could happen.
2- The angels left with Avraham to go to Sodom where they would destroy five evil cities and rescue Lot. Hashem told Avraham that He was destroying the city because it is so evil. Avraham tried to beg for Sodom to be saved, but once Hashem said there weren't even 10 righteous people in the city, Avraham conceded.
3- Lot invited the angels into his home to eat and rest when they arrived in Sodom. The people of Sodom got angry at Lot for being hospitable, so they surrounded his house and wanted to hurt the guests. Lot refused to give the angels to the angry crowd, and as they tried to break down the door, the angels made all of them blind. The angels then told Lot that the city was about to be destroyed, so they took him and his family out of the city and warned them not to look back.
4- Hashem set Sodom on fire. Lot's wife looked back as they were fleeing, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and his daughters took cover in a cave, where they slept with their father out of desperation because they thought the entire world was destroyed. Each daughter had one son who became the great nations of Amon and Moav. Avraham moved to a Plishti city where the king tried to take Sarah for himself. Hashem struck the entire palace with disease and appeared to the king in a dream warning him to give her back. The king gave her back with many gifts. Sarah gave birth to Yitzchak at the age of 90, and he had a *brit milah* eight days later.
5- As Yitzchak grew up, Sarah realized that Yishmael was a bad influence on him, so she demanded Avraham send him and Hagar away. Hashem told Avraham to listen to Sarah, so he sent them out. They wandered in the desert until they ran out of water and almost died, then an angel appeared and showed Hagar a well of water. Yishamel grew up in the desert and became an amazing archer.
6- Avimelech asked Avraham to enter into a treaty with him that neither of them would hurt the other for the next three generations. Avraham agreed, and they named the place Be'er Sheva over a contested well. Avraham opened an inn there and taught people about Hashem.
7- Hashem commanded Avraham to offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice. He obliged, but right before Avraham slaughtered Yitzchak, an angel told him to stop. Instead, Avraham offered a ram. Hashem rewarded Avraham with blessings for passing this test.

Peer Power

Elyada Shabtai ('23)

The Midrash Rabbah writes when discussing Avraham's journey to discovering Hashem: "There was a man who was going from place to place and he saw a castle brightly lit. He said, 'Is it possible that this palace does not have a keeper?' The Master of the building peeked at him through the window and said to him, 'I am the Master of this castle.'

Moshe Chaim Luzzato, the Ramchal, discusses that, "a person should stop for at least some time every day, free from all thoughts, and quest within his heart, 'What did the early forefathers do that Hashem desired for them so much?'" What did Avraham do that he and his children became the focal point of the entire Torah and of all subsequent human history?

The Ramchal explores why Avraham and the Avot became who they were. We know that they were great individuals, the best in history, but what about them made them different from everyone else? Why were they so extraordinarily special?

An experiment took place in a psychology class in a high school many years ago, designed to test the power of peer pressure. The senior class designated a certain freshman for this experiment. An orange would be hung up in front of the room and the seniors were all coached to proclaim its color "purple". The freshman that was chosen would be the last one to be asked what he thought its color was. This experiment never failed. The freshmen *always* agreed with the seniors that the orange was indeed purple. Later the freshmen would explain that they were trying to avoid harassment in

the lunchroom, but the freshmen's actual perception of the fruit did indeed change after each kid in the class would state that its color was purple.

This makes Avraham's ability to stand against the entire world and its most powerful ruler even more impressive. Where did Avraham get this ability from, the courage to do what he knew to be right? Avraham's thought process could have been that since the whole world disagreed with him, he should correctly question his own perception and switch his opinion. How and why did Avraham remain so fixed and loyal to his thesis that he was able to confidently convince many others as well?

When discussing taste there is room for persuasion. Deciding that the milk is in fact sour after eight people already said so makes logical sense, but not so when discussing God. Avraham knew that this subject matter was a particularly serious one. Avraham wasn't going to be convinced just because the whole world, including his father, thought and believed another way. The Midrash tells us that Avraham conducted extensive research on the topic.

The Rambam in Morah Nevuchim states, "truth does not become more-true by virtue that the whole world agrees with it nor less so even if the whole world disagrees with it!" Galileo said something very similar: "In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth that humble reasoning of a single individual."

This is what made Avraham different: his ability to look for *emet* and not be persuaded by outside influences. This is how Avraham was able to pass Hashem's ten tests. He was able to see past the simple as well as convenient ideologies of the rest of the world, and seek real *emet*. We should be inspired by Avraham: conquer, pass our own Akeidat Yitzchak, and take this idea and try to incorporate it into our lives. Shabbat shalom.

Acceptance

Naomi Baredes ('23)

After endless years of attempting to conceive a child, countless pleadings to Hashem, Sarah at the ripe old age of 90 gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Yitzchak. Certainly this made Avraham and Sarah ecstatic considering the years of torment and suffering they endured to get to this point. This son would grant them the continuation of their monotheistic legacy. However, there is a shift in the story, one we can't completely grasp. When Hashem commands Avraham to take his only son up the mountain and offer him as a human sacrifice, we're left perplexed. Why would Hashem finally give Avraham and Sarah a son just to take him away? Why would Hashem end Avraham's bloodline? What exactly was His master plan?

Yet, Avraham obeyed Hashem's wishes and embarked on his journey to the designated mountain. Avraham had no reason to believe Hashem would eventually change His mind or that this would be a mere test for him to show if his beliefs aligned. Therefore, with Yitzchak's consent, Avraham tied him down onto the altar and took out a knife, ready to take his son's life. Immediately an angel of Hashem cried out:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי. וַיֹּאמֶר אַל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנַּעַר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי יְרֵא אֱלֹקִים אַתָּה וְלֹא חָשַׂכְתָּ אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי...

"And he said, Avraham, Avraham, don't stretch out your hand to the boy and don't do anything to him because now I know that you fear God and you didn't withhold your son from me" (Bereishit 22:11-12).

Rashi finds this message rather strange. Why does Hashem say the same thing twice: "Don't stretch out your hand to the boy," and "Don't do anything to him"? To elucidate this question, Rashi quotes the midrash: "after Hashem said don't stretch out your hand to the boy, Avraham responded: "If so, I have come here in vain. I will inflict a wound on him and extract a little blood." God then retorted back, "No, do not do the slightest thing (מְאוּמָה) to him." Do not cause him any blemish (מוּם). It is evident from this midrash that Hashem was trying to put to rest His commandment because now He knew for a fact that Avraham feared him.

The truth is, there's a difference between understanding and accepting. The story of Avraham gives us a glimpse of what it truly means to not understand something, but to be able to accept it because our faith in Hashem overrides our uncertainty. Once we embrace that Hashem works in incomprehensible and enigmatic ways, only then can we accept the truth. When we let go of the "whys" and the "hows," we can finally come to terms with reality – a reality that can help us connect on a more profound level. Avraham was only the beginning. Something we can all ask ourselves is, would we have followed Hashem blindly without knowing the outcome?

Connect to the Tzadik

Gavi Gross ('25)

Dvar Torah from Ozer Bergman based on Sichot Haran (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom) #22

וַיְהִי בְּשַׁחֵת אֱלֹקִים אֶת עָרֵי הַכִּכָּר וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹקִים אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיְשַׁלַּח אֶת לוֹט מִתּוֹךְ הַהֲפֵכָה...

"When God destroyed the cities of the plain, God remembered Avraham and sent Lot from amidst the upheaval…" (Bereishit 19:29).

A midrash on this pasuk comments, "Even when the Holy, Blessed One is angry, He has compassion." This teaches: "Fortunate are the *tzadikim* and fortunate are those who cling to them."

What does it mean to cling to *tzadikim*? Rabbi Nachman says that it is very good to be worthy of connecting to a genuine *tzadik*. One who is connected to a genuine *tzadik* can grab hold of him and survive. Since he is connected and affiliated with the *tzadik*, he will not be cast off along with

the wicked.
What happens to Lot in this week's parsha is a pretty good demonstration of this teaching. In spite of the fact that Lot had traded away his close connection with Avraham Avinu for the greed and immorality of Sodom, he was still saved. The lessons he learned from Avraham Avinu gave Lot a vestigial connection to the *tzadik*. Despite the mortal risk involved by committing the "crime of hospitality" in the world of Sodom, Lot still actively sought guests (Rashi: Bereishit 19:1). When his guests spoke negatively of his adopted city's despicable behavior, Lot, somewhat close to Avraham Avinu, attempted to defend the Sodomites (Bereishis Rabbah 50:5). As a result of being saved, Lot and his daughters began the family tree that eventually produced David HaMelech, great-grandfather of Mashiach.
Similarly, we who, despite our weaknesses and occasional falling to our *yetzer hara* actively seek a connection with tzaddikim, can hope and pray that our grasp on them will always be firm and lead to greatness.

Kindness and Beyond

Leeby Kessock ('25)

Imagine the scenario: 99 year old Avraham sitting in the opening of his tent, hoping to have visitors even though he was just circumcised. Hashem comes to do *bikur cholim* and at the same time three "men" come to visit Avraham. Avraham says to Hashem, please wait a moment while I go and take care of my guests. He does not ask the men any questions about who they are or where they are from, he just runs to prepare food and drink.

Avraham gave up spending one-on-one time with the Creator of the universe so that he could welcome the strangers. His one worry was if they were comfortable, even if it meant giving up his own comfort. He understood that his purpose on earth was to strengthen and grow his spirituality. There was nothing audacious about Avraham's actions; he understood what he was put in this world to do.

Rabbi Paysach Krohn is an author and a speaker, as well as a *mohel*. He was in his twenties when his father passed away. It was quite difficult entering the field of circumcision, and he had hard times supporting his family. One day a friend of his family asked to meet with him. At the meeting, the man handed him an envelope with a large sum of money. Rabbi Krohn appreciated the gesture but refused to accept the money because he did not want any charity. The man said that this was a "loan" and that Rabbi Krohn could pay him back when the time was right. The time came and Rabbi Krohn went to the man with the money. But the man said he wouldn't take Rabbi Krohn's money, because he once found himself in the same position and his friend extended the same kindness. His friend had said to keep the money and he could "repay" the loan by helping out someone else who would need the money, passing on the mitzvah. He told Rabbi Krohn that even though he had said it was a loan, he wanted Rabbi Krohn to keep this money and one day "repay" someone else who would need the money. That is exactly what Rabbi Krohn did.

Kindness is the way of Avraham. It is the path to true spirituality. We are all blessed to be in this world and that Hashen gave us the opportunity to become closer to Him by following in His ways, just like our forefathers. What a privilege it is to be able to have a share in the heritage of such people. Have a good Shabbos!

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