

PARASHAH SIXTEEN

Genesis 19:1-38; Isaiah 17:14-18:7; Luke 17:20-37

notes by Tim Hegg

The Day of the Lord

Here, in this remarkable and mysterious text, we have a clear example of God's judging wrath against willful sin. In the face of open rebellion, gross sinfulness, and blatant idolatry, we get a glimpse of God's burning judgment against sinners. Against this dark backdrop, however, is painted a most splendid picture of HaShem's grace, for out of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah He saves Lot and his family. And even in this event of salvation we see a picture of what perseverance entails, for though Lot's wife (in the legends of the Sages her name is Iris) is taken out of the city, she ultimately perishes with the city, for in the end she displayed the true intentions of her heart to remain there.

The bargaining which went on between Abraham and HaShem in the previous chapter clearly sets up the present story. Merely ten righteous people would be sufficient to spare the city, but obviously not even ten could be found. Lot, wishing to emulate Abraham in extending hospitality, is nonetheless hampered greatly by the culture in which he lived. Yet it appears that hospitality is the test which the angels (now only two in number since the One referred to as HaShem had remained with Abraham) utilize to determine the reality of Lot's faith. Had he retained the teaching of righteousness which he had received when living near Abraham? The angel's initial refusal may signal a test of Lot's spiritual condition. *The works of righteousness flow from a righteous heart.*

Not only was it impossible to find a minyan (the rabbinic word for the minimum necessary for corporate prayer) of righteous men in Sodom, the story emphasizes that there could not be found even one righteous person, apart from Lot and his family. The phrase "from young to old" in v. 4 (מִנְעַר וְעַד־זָקֵן) is a phrase which usually describes a collective whole (Josh 6:2; Est 3:13). So rank were the societies and culture of Sodom and Gomorrah that there was nothing left to redeem. Like a dilapidated house which is better torn down than remodeled, so these cities could only be destroyed—not renovated. What a waste—people created in God's image, created to show forth the glories of His person, must now be destroyed, for they have forever annulled their ability to accomplish their creative purpose. *There is a point at which even God's patience reaches its limits.*

We should not overlook the obvious fact that the depth of sin to which this society had sunk is marked by their sexual deviancy. The very first commandment given to mankind by his Creator is to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. It is, then, a first order of rebellion to take the sacred and beautiful union between a man and his wife and turn it into a dark and animal impulse. It is, in its final reality, an attempt to erase the *imago dei*, the image of God and to become like the animals who have breath but who were not created in God's image. We should also remember that the schools of comparative religions have shown time and time again that sexual deviancy and idolatry always go hand in hand. A society which worships idols is also one that is marked by sexual sin—you can count on it. If you see one, look for the other.

This is very much to the point in our own times. The "sexual revolution" opened our society to gross immorality which has reached into every institution we once held sacred. From the pulpit to the oval office, decency has fallen. It is a grief, indeed, that people in general have lost

confidence in their leaders, and often it is because integrity in this area of sexual relations has all but disappeared. The “fix” for this deplorable situation is not a vow of chastity, but a removal of the idols which have led to the sin in the first place. Putting God where He belongs, as sovereign Lord of all, and thus ruler to be followed, would open the way for genuine repentance and a true change of heart. But we cannot expect to topple the idols of our society if we harbor them in our churches. *Judgment must begin in the house of God* (1 Pet. 4:17). We must ask the hard questions of ourselves: if our lives, homes, businesses, were examined by the Lord Himself, what things of impurity would He point out? Would our selection of videos pass the test? What about the magazines to which we subscribe? The education we give our children? Our wardrobes? Are we countering the anti-family, anti-marriage, anti-childbearing emphasis of our society? Are we applauding modesty and turning away from that which is indecent (even if the society doesn’t label it as such)? *God is just as grieved over our moral decline as He was over Sodom’s. He hasn’t changed His viewpoint about righteousness and sin.*

Lot, though he probably didn’t realize it fully, had been deeply affected by the decadent society in which he lived. His gross suggestion that he offer the towns people his daughters if they would just leave his guests alone was a disgusting attempt to please God by a debased and corrupt alternative. Apparently Lot had not discerned, as Abraham had, that the “men” who spoke to him were in fact angels. Their willingness to sleep in the street or town square showed that they had no fear of people—they were powerful enough to take care of themselves! But Lot wants them inside, out of the way, not in the place where they would prove beyond doubt how base the Sodomites were.

The fact that Lot had lost a Godly sense of morality is likewise seen in the thoughts and actions of his daughters after they leave Sodom and settle in Zoar. Rather than turning to the God of Abraham to help them in what appeared to be a “no win situation,” they take matters into their own hands and commit incest in order to produce offspring. Like their father, they try to use unrighteous methods to accomplish a divine command. The results are not good. The offspring are Moab and Ammon, who become fathers of the enemies of Israel. Indeed, Milcom (also called Molech), the idol worshiped by child-sacrifice, was the invention of the Ammonites (1 Ki 11:5). One can hardly agree with the Sages who almost universally consider the incestuous act of Lot’s daughters as righteous, since they acted to preserve the human race and produced the people that eventually brought Ruth, a Moabitess, into the line of Messiah. What this highlights is not the righteousness of Lot’s daughters but the sovereignty of God to overcome the sinfulness of mankind! Satan thought he could thwart God’s messianic plans through the sin of Sodom in the family of Lot, but this was not to be. Out of darkness God inevitably brings light!

We dare not leave this *parashah*, however, without commenting on yet one more obvious point: Lot is saved from Sodom, *not because he deserved to be saved, but because God acted in sovereign mercy*. V. 16 – “for the compassion of Adonai was upon him.” Lot’s attachment to the Abrahamic covenant was not a matter of Lot’s choice but of God’s choosing. He was the one who saw the rich land and took it without consideration of how living near/in Sodom could ruin his soul and the souls of his family. He was the one who was willing to accommodate the gross lusts of the people at the expense of his daughters. And, he was the one who longed to stay, and had to be dragged out of the city by God’s messengers. Lot may have had an inner sense of what was righteous, but he allowed himself to be trapped in the ways of the world, and it cost him dearly.

This brings to mind the notice of Peter regarding Lot. In his exhortations regarding God's judgment and mercy, he writes:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. (2Pet 2:4-10)

We are taken aback by Peter's description of Lot! He is described as "righteous Lot" and as having a "righteous soul." Moreover, Peter indicates that because of Lot's righteousness, he was tormented in soul day after day as he watched the godless lifestyle of the Sodomites. The Sages note that Lot was more righteous than his wife (Mid. Rab. *Numbers* 10.5) and that he sought mercy for the people of Sodom all night before the destruction until the angels forbade him to intercede any more (Mid. Rab. *Genesis* 16.5). But how was Lot considered righteous himself? It hardly seems possible considering his actions!

What we must conclude is that Lot knew the righteous ways of HaShem, and he accepted the way of God himself. In other words, he knew what was right, and he longed for righteousness within his own soul. But we must also conclude that Lot was trapped by his own circumstances. He had allowed his life to become entrenched in the surroundings of wickedness. For Lot to have picked up and left would have meant the loss of most of his wealth. His flocks and herds were too numerous to be sustained anywhere else than the lush pastures of Sodom. The wealth of this world had anchored him to the filth of Sodom.

This is seen in his reluctance to leave. The choice before him was to leave and preserve his life, and in so doing, lose all of his wealth, or to stay. Had the angels not pulled him out, it appears that he would have stayed! Wealth had blinded the spiritual eyes of "righteous Lot."

In the life of Lot, then, we are taught a very important lesson. *Decisions we make for economic reasons, but which neglect the more important issues of the soul, are destined for disaster.* This is an important issue for our times. The affluence of our modern world can be the enemy's trap. We must set our longings and affections on things above, not on things in this world. Our priorities must be spiritually appraised.

But Peter's point is that God will never lose those He chooses for righteousness. God rescues Lot, even from the consequences of his poor decisions. Granted, Lot loses everything except some members of his family. But his life is spared. The sovereign love of God will not be thwarted, even by the sinfulness of man.

We too are spared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, by which He saved us and redeemed us from our own "Sodom." God could have done

the same for those who lived in Sodom, but He didn't. And this is the mystery! Why Abraham? Why Lot? With such a question the answer of Paul rings in our ears: "who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" (Rom. 9:20). There comes a point in our inquiry into God's grace that we must simply stop and admit our limitations.

So the sovereign mercies of God, undeserved, unearned, become a prime motivation for our worship. We love Him, because He first loved us.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
Were every blade of grass a quill,
Were the world of parchment made,
And every one a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean, drain it dry.
Nor would the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

("Hadamut" written by Meir ben Isaac Nehorai, 1050 CE,
Cantor in Worms, Germany. Originally written in Aramaic.)