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Parashat Vayera

A Leader Who Failed

-Rabbi Professor Nerya Guttel-

There is no question that Avraham is the dominant figure in parshot Lech Lecha and Vayera. Through his journey to the Land of Israel, his handling of local leaders, the near sacrifice of Yitzchak, etc, we get a clear view of the luminosity of his leadership qualities, which, naturally, overshadow those of lesser leaders.

In these parshot the other omnipresent figure, alongside Avraham, is Lot, Avraham's nephew. Lot grew up in the shadow of a generational leader and one would have assumed that he would have learned from such a great teacher. The Torah even testifies to the fact that at a certain point in time the residents of Sodom recognized Lot's leadership abilities and appointed him judge at the city gates, as at that time the court sat at the gates to the town: "And Lot sat at the gates of Sodom" (Bereishit 19:1). Our Sages commented on this verse (Bereishit Rabbah; Rashi) that "it was on that very day that he was appointed the head of the court." Lot must also be credited with the fulfillment of the mitzvah for which he was willing to give his own life: welcoming guests into his home (*hachnasat orchim*). The midrash relates as follows: "When Lot arrived in Sodom he would do the following – he would welcome guests into his home, and when it was proclaimed that anyone who supported another with food would be burned, he became afraid to do such things during the day (publicly) and began doing them at night (in secret)" (Yalkut Shimoni Vayera, 84). Another mitzvah, which was not easily performed, is attributed to Lot, and that is the mitzvah of guarding one's tongue (*shemirat halashon*): "When Avraham declared Sarah to be his sister, Lot knew the truth and held his tongue" (Bereishit Rabbah 51:6, 9). Thus, the Torah presents Lot as a leader with real merit. Lot, in fact, was not lacking in potential.

However, on other levels, and certainly with respect to leadership, Lot was a failure. Not only did he not educate the people of Sodom and teach them human decency, and not only did he not pray for their salvation, but when he became aware that the city was to be destroyed, the only thing then on his mind was his own salvation, along with that of his family. On the other hand, Lot's uncle, Avraham, prayed for the people of Sodom, did everything he could to save them and even risked his own life in battle in order to save Lot, even though by that time Lot had already parted ways with Avraham. Lot could have been a leader, particularly when he was appointed elder and head of the community. Lot, however, was the embodiment of a passive personality. He was led and did not lead, he was shepherded and did not shepherd and he was pulled and did not pull. Even from the very beginning Lot had been pulled along, following Avraham as he left Ur Casdim. Lot was a follower, while Avraham was a leader. When Lot's herdsmen did not act appropriately, Lot did not protest. When Avraham forced him to separate and move away, Lot chose to relocate to an agriculturally fertile area, despite the fact that by that time everyone was already aware that "the people of Sodom were evil and very wicked before God" (Bereishit 13:13). Later, when Lot's daughters lay incestually with him, he "was unaware of her lying down and of her rising" (Bereishit 19:33), regarding which the Talmud



ארגון רבני צהר



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states the following: "Not on the first night and he did not even take care on the second night (Babylonian Talmud Horayot, 10b). Lot's passivity was extreme and it resulted in undesired consequences.

Even worse, perhaps, is that Lot personifies the warning given by our Sages: "An uncultured person is not sin-fearing, and neither is an ignorant person pious" (Avot 2:5). Lot exemplifies the ignorant righteous person who is unfamiliar with the halacha (law). It is true that he was willing to sacrifice himself in order to fulfill the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* by welcoming the angels into his home, despite knowing full well that such an act, when performed in Sodom, was literally life threatening. He learned from his uncle Avraham that welcoming guests is even greater than being in the presence of Hashem (BT Shabbat 127a; BT Shvuot 35b) and he refused to forgo the mitzvah. He even went to great lengths to fulfill it in the best way possible. Nevertheless, when Lot was put to the test "and the people of the city, the people of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, the entire populace from every end [of the city]" (Bereishit 19:4), he did not hesitate to offer up his daughters and thus to trade a life for a life. Lot's behavior is a form of extreme and irrational altruism performed at the expense of others, in contrast to any moral and halachic ethical standard. Lot was so focused on himself, on his own fulfillment of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, that he lost himself and completely submitted to the end that justified the means. It is therefore not surprising that immediately thereafter Lot's complete passivity was exploited by his daughters in their incestual act with Lot himself, a form of a "measure for a measure" (*mida k'neged mida*).

We may thus conclude that although Lot received a leadership post, which could have been leveraged for the greater good – he failed. Lot thus embodied failure as a leader.

Rabbi Professor Nerya Guttel is the president of Orot Yisrael College and the rabbi of the Radlich community in Jerusalem