

LOT'S FAILED TRIAL

BEREL DOV LERNER

Lot is something of an ambivalent character; we do not know in what category to place him.¹ He might be called a "righteous man in Sodom" (to borrow the Hebrew phrase), but then one must ask why a righteous man would decide to live in Sodom? Lot did learn the virtue of hospitality from Abraham, and when the angels came to visit Sodom, he insisted that they stay under his roof. However, when his home was later surrounded by a dangerous mob his hospitality took a grotesque turn and he addressed the crowd with an offer: *'Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof'* (Gen. 19:8). Is this the behavior of a righteous man?²

As far as the narrator in the Torah is concerned, Lot's story ends quite badly. The last words we read about him leave him in exceedingly humiliating and unflattering circumstances: *That night also they made their father drink wine, and the younger one went and lay with him; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. Thus the two daughters of Lot came to be with child by their father* (19:35-36). This may be a case of poetic justice. The same "righteous" man who was prepared to hand his daughters over to a vicious mob, saying, *'You may do to them as you please'* ends up finding himself in the reverse situation, his daughters doing to him as they please! How did Lot descend to such humiliation? What series of events brought his story to such a disgraceful finale?

Let us review the background narrative. Two angels arrive in Sodom and remove Lot, his wife, and his two unmarried daughters from the town before its impending destruction. One of the angels explains to Lot that he must flee from the plains of the Jordan to a safe place in the hills. Lot refuses, fearing he will not manage to escape in time. Instead, he asks the angels to spare Zoar, a nearby small town in which he might find shelter. The angel answers him, promising: *'Very well, I will grant you this favor too, and I will not annihilate the town of which you have spoken'* (19:21).

Berel Dov Lerner, Ph.D., is a member of Kibbutz Sheluhot and teaches philosophy at Western Galilee College

Something remarkable has just occurred – the angel has responded favorably to Lot's request. It appears that Lot has succeeded where Abraham failed. Abraham had attempted to save Sodom and Gomorrah, but to no avail; Lot asks for Zoar to be spared, and his request is granted. Lot's star is rising high in the firmament of the Torah's spiritual heroes. But then something goes wrong. Lot has second thoughts about the promise given him by the angel; perhaps the town will be destroyed after all. He is afraid to stay in Zoar and leaves for the hills: *Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he and his two daughters lived in a cave* (19:20).

Now Lot, whose wife had been lost when she was turned into a pillar of salt (19:26), is alone in a cave with his two daughters. The situation seems drastic, the very end of his world. Lot's older daughter looks around and comes to the conclusion that everyone else on earth has died; she must take action to preserve the continued existence of the human race.³ She gets up and tells her younger sister: *'Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to consort with us in the way of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father'* (20:31).

Lot's story reaches its notorious conclusion when his daughters succeed in conceiving by him. I would like to argue that **it is all entirely Lot's own fault**. He was supposed to have had faith in the angel's promise; he was supposed to have remained in Zoar. Instead, he lost his nerve and headed for the hills. If only he had remained in Zoar, his daughters would surely have seen the townspeople and understood that their father was not the last man on earth. It would have never have occurred to them to conceive by him. Worse yet, Lot left the inhabitants of Zoar to face their fate alone. The town had been spared for his sake, and it may be assumed that his presence there would have guaranteed its survival. Did the people of Zoar in fact die as victims of Lot's cowardice? There is no clear answer to this question. The town's name is mentioned a few more times in Scripture (Deut. 34:3; Isa. 15:5; Jer. 48:34; Ps. 42:7) but there is no indication that it was cited as anything more than a purely geographical designation marking the boundary of the barren zone surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Mishnah (Avot 5:3) tells us that Abraham withstood ten trials of faith; Lot was tested only once, but failed. What weakness led to Lot's failure? The

Torah alludes to a possible answer: Lot may have suffered from a kind of religious egocentrism. He thought everything depended on him, that he was the axis on which Divine Providence turns.

When Lot wants Zoar spared, he begins addressing the angel with these words: '*Your servant has found favor in your eyes, and you have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life . . .*' (19:19). Lot believes that he was spared because **he** found favor in eyes of God and of His angels. The man who had decided to take up residence in Sodom, a city whose people were *very wicked sinners against the Lord* (14:13) because it offered water for his flocks (14:10), the man who was prepared to throw his daughters to a rapacious crowd, thinks himself to be a great saint. It was thanks to his own merit that angels were sent to save him. The Torah, however, almost immediately corrects this false impression. Just as we reach the middle of Lot's story, the narration changes its point of view, leaving him momentarily aside and taking us far away to Abraham, who has woken early in the morning to survey the scene of catastrophe from a safe and distant vantage point.

What piece of information could be so crucial for our understanding of the story that the flow of the narrative must be abruptly broken so that it can be revealed to us? We are told: *Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval* (19:29). The Torah takes pains to make it clear that Lot was deluded. He was not spared because he found favor in the eyes of God but rather because God was mindful of his constant protector, Abraham.

Now we can understand why Lot's confidence broke down in Zoar. He thought that everything depended on him. He thought he had already taken advantage of God's good will towards him when he was rescued from Sodom. Now he found himself making further demands, asking for Zoar to be spared. Doubts began to eat away at his confidence. Could he be certain that the town would be saved? Did he really deserve another miracle? What had he done to merit a second Divine intervention? He failed to understand that he was not alone; that Abraham's merit was also protecting him. Feeling unworthy and afraid, he fled the town, setting in motion the events and circumstances that would lead to his impregnating his own daughters.

If the reading here presented is correct, Lot's story is ironic indeed. He did not understand that he had survived thanks to Abraham, the true spiritual hero who passed every test sent his way. Finally, when the moment came for Lot to face his own test, it was the delusion that everything depended on him alone that caused him to lose faith and fail.

NOTES

1. For a list of general studies of Lot's character, see M. Avioz, "Josephus's portrayal of Lot and his family," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 16 (2006) pp. 3-13, n. 1.
2. Lot's treatment of his daughters has been the subject of much controversy. In this paper I follow the general direction of feminist critics who condemn his behavior. See, for instance, I. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis: a Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993). Rashkow finds "Lot's offer to the crowd...incredible" (p. 81) and goes on to attack several of his exegetical defenders. Surprisingly, L. Bechtel's "A feminist reading of Genesis 19.1-11" in Athalya Brenner, ed. *Genesis. A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (2nd series). (Sheffield; Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp. 108-128 offers something of an apology for Lot's behavior: "Lot...made his offer with confidence that its incongruity and inappropriateness...[would]...stop the action and prevent further aggression" (p. 124).
3. It might be argued that the men of Zoar survived and that the daughters should have been aware of that fact. G. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994) p. 61, writes: "Presumably, there were at least eligible husbands no further away than Zoar." That supposition could lead to a much darker understanding of the daughters' scheme than the one offered in the present paper. Did they copulate with their drunken father with the deliberate intent to avenge their honor after he had offered them to the crowd in Sodom?