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Rabbi Norman Lamm "Vayera" November 9, 1957THE LOT OF LOT

In this Sidra, which records some of the greatest events in the history of mankind, such as the "Akeidah", and through whose holy passages there move such spiritual giants as Abraham, Isaac and Sarah, we find one character more distinguished by the shadow in which he is hidden than by the light which is cast upon him. He flits through the last two portions in an incidental sort of way, a bit mysterious, never fully capturing our attention, seemingly a character accidentally and fortuitously rescued from total oblivion of history only because he had a great uncle. He is a man who intrudes upon sacred history, and never really becomes a part of it.

This man is Lot, the nephew of Abraham. And perhaps his very importance lies in the fact that he is not a major character, a chief actor in the historical drama, but rather a secondary, stage-hand **type**. Why is that important? Because we can identify with him more easily than with Abraham. Most of us are not great, not giants, not Abrahams, but ordinary mortals with ordinary foibles and weaknesses, ordinary virtues

and ordinary goals. Lot is the average man, and from him and his life, the average Jew can learn more in a negative way than perhaps even from Abraham in a positive way. In the life of this man we can see the pitfalls ^{or} befall all of us, the dangers in the life of every man, so that he can teach us how not to live and what not to do.

Lot cuts a tragic figure indeed. He was given a number of real advantages early in life. For one thing, he had a rich uncle--Abraham--who set him up in business. This same uncle provided him with a Jewish home, a decent life, education. Lot proved loyal to Abraham even after he left him, to settle in Sodom, the city of wealth and corruption. Even there he still keeps many of the things he learned from Abraham, such as hospitality. He leads an "underground" Jewish life. He is the nephew of Abraham inside, the judge of Sodom outside. He becomes a respected member of their society. He is one of their elders. He has seemingly made the best of both worlds--a Jew at home and adjusted to his society nonetheless. This is the balance struck by the average, well-meaning, good-natured, but not overly idealistic man.

But listen to what happens at this point. The

angels come to destroy Sodom because of its cruelty. And here three things happen which spell tragedy after tragedy for poor Lot. A merciful God spares him from death in the destruction of Sodom, but his life has been seriously impaired.

1. He find, after a long stay in Sodom, that he has inverted values, he has lost his spiritual perspective. He still retains something of the teachings of Abraham, but not in the proper proportion. Thus when the mob asks for the 3 strangers who are his guests to be victims of their degenerate passions, Lot offers to protect the strangers--a virtue of no mean order. But how?--by committing a far more degenerate offense--he offers his daughters in their stead. He has values, but they are lopsided.

2. He finds himself--alone in his own home. When the angels plead with him to leave, he turns to his sons-in-law. The Torah calls them " (וְהַנְּשִׁים הַנִּשְׁאָרוֹת, וְהַנְּשִׁים הַנִּשְׁאָרוֹת " --in other words, they are not really sons-in-law, they have no relation with him, they merely married his daughters. And what is their reaction? וְהַנְּשִׁים הַנִּשְׁאָרוֹת, וְהַנְּשִׁים הַנִּשְׁאָרוֹת

(וְהַנְּשִׁים הַנִּשְׁאָרוֹת) . And his wife?--she cannot resist a last look at the hot bed of corruption, it still lures her, and as she parts from her husband, she looks back and it becomes וְהַנְּשִׁים הַנִּשְׁאָרוֹת, she is calcified. Thus--

Lot's terrible loneliness: his own family no longer understands him or sympathizes with him. He is a stranger in his own home.

3. And his greatest tragedy: when he and his two daughters are left alone as survivors, they think that the whole world has been destroyed and they are the only survivors. They become enmeshed in a deadly gloom and think that human race will die with them. And so, out of the depths of their despair, in order to realize their destiny as humans and practice their good intentions of settling God's world, they commit the most serious of all immoralities--incest, while Lot is in a drunken stupor.

Quite a miserable end for a man who never had serious pretensions to great evil. Why is this? Why such terrible punishment? And the answer is that there is only one reason: BECAUSE HE LEFT ABRAHAM. All along, he was quite willing to follow his great uncle, willing to learn from him and lead his kind of life, but when it hit his pocketbook, when it came to money--

וְלֹט הָיָה בְּרֵעַ אֶבְרָהָם (17) --then he leaves Abraham, and is willing to settle even in Sodom, the by-word of all that is evil. Now don't think that Lot completely relished this idea--after all, he was a pupil of Abraham. But business required it, he told himself. Financial neces-

sity had forced him to leave both Abraham and his ways. And besides, corrupt ~~thru~~ though Sodom was, it was a beautiful City as the Torah described it last week:

וְהָיָה לְכָל אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּח וְלֹא יִשְׁכַּח וְלֹא יִשְׁכַּח . Hence we read 801

עַל פִּי אֱלֹהִים, upon which our Rabbis comment (ע' י"ב)

עַל פִּי אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁכַּח . Maybe Lot will carry over some small habits that he had learned in the house of Abraham. Maybe there will be some souvenirs or mementoes. But essentially he had torn himself away from Abraham, and along with that, from the God of Abraham.

And this is indeed the crucial event in the life of Lot, in the life of every average man: - עַל פִּי אֱלֹהִים

עַל פִּי אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁכַּח . This departure from Abraham and all that he stood for, this was the cause of his grief and the seedling of his tragedy. And if you analyze the whole episode of Lot carefully, you will see that he was rewarded "midah kneged midah". The resulting tragedies follow the pattern of Lot's sin.

1. Lot sinks to the most degenerate immorality, because of inverted values. But did he not bring it upon himself? Was it not he himself who made the decision to leave Abraham because of "economic pressures"? Was it not he who first consciously inverted his own values?

2. He was lonely in his own home, and an alien to wife, children, children-in-law. But it was brought on by himself. By leaving Abraham, he isolated himself

from Abraham's God--and now found himself isolated by others.

3. He was led to his ultimate degradation, the depths of immorality and disruption of his family, the act of incest, because of the doom and pessimism which made him think that he and his daughters were the only survivors, that the world was destroyed. But did he not bring on himself this feeling of no choice, of absolute necessity? Did he not begin this life of pessimism when he decided to settle in Sodom, to leave Abraham--because business required it, because otherwise he could never survive in the competitive market? He began by considering that there was only one way out --Sodom; and ended by having his daughters consider only one way out--his deepest and most lasting humiliation.

So then, in the one act of leaving Abraham, or as our Rabbis said it: *עליו של יוסף נאמר (נדרה ויון)*, Lot suffered a corresponding series of tragic consequences of inversion of values, loneliness, and a deadly and sickening pessimism. His is the story of a man who seems well established, successful and at the peak of his career, but whose early, serious errors bring his life crashing into a conclusion of shame and disgrace.

It does not take too much to see why and how this

story of Lot is a parable which is true for Jews of all time, especially for the "average Jew" of today. Just look at what has happened to so many of our fellow Jews.

1. We have suffered an inversion of values, just as did Lot. Thus, we place Chanukah, with all its colorfulness and festivity, on a much higher rung than the Sabbath.

Many a person who would never dream of forgetting to celebrate Chanukah in the grand manner, will not think twice of violating the sanctity of the Sabbath. Similarly, there are many other inversions of value. In many a home where Kashruth has long been abandoned, the unveiling of a tombstone is regarded as one of the fundamentals of our faith. How horrified some people are, when they hear their Rabbi minimizing the importance of the unveiling. And how irritated they are when they hear the same Rabbi emphasizing the significance of Kashruth.

2. All modern man, and especially Jews, suffer from intense feelings of alienation, both philosophical and emotional loneliness. We feel that we do not really belong in this world. We know that we are not completely accepted by our beloved country--not with the pact with Saudi Arabia, not with the constant emphasis of this being a Christian country, not with the plague of the Sunday Blue Laws which discriminate against Saturday Sabbath observance. Our relations

with Isreal are only philanthropic and sentimental, not sufficiently strong to diminish our sense of estrangement and loneliness. So much of what goes by the name of "American Judaism" has absolutely nothing to do with God, so that we are estranged from Him too. And in our loneliness, in our estrangement and solitude, we nervously look about for more and more entertainment, we obsessively seek our luxuries, even our laughter becomes anxious instead of relaxed. No wonder so many moderns find that they must, out of their solitude, turn to the couch of the psychiatrist to seek solace and a sense of being wanted. 3. Jews of certain kinds come to conclusions which are bleakly pessimistic. They become prophets of complete assimilation, prognosticators of doom. You recall the two prophets, one a professor and one a historian, who recently wrote in the B'nai Brith Monthly, that we Jews have no religious future in this country.

So that like Lot of old, the value-inversion, the loneliness, and the pessimism are our heritage.

And were we to trace these consequences to their original source, we would find this too identical with the source of the woes of Lot. The "original sin" of American Jewry is:

ERPN CIP 7011, we have

used all kinds of excuses, especially that of financial necessity, as the reason and justification for leaving
אלוהים ויין, Almighty God. Like Lot, we do keep
up certain practices that come from the house of
Abraham in order to assuage our consciences: we hang
Jewish paintings on the walls, we display a big Chanukah
menorah, our living rooms are amply stocked with Israeli
ash trays . . . but our Judaism and our Jewishness are
otherwise not noticeable in our lives. Like Lot, we
have begun to live an underground existence in so far
as our Jewishness is concerned; for, like the nephew
of Abraham, we have learned to adjust to every con-
ceivable kind of Sodomite practice without.

אלוהים ויין, by running out
on the God of Abraham, we have brought on ourselves all
these undesirable and unfortunate consequences.

But of course things need not be thus. We are not
too far gone. There can still be a realignment in
Jewish life in this country. But in order to accomplish
that, the process has to be reversed: instead of going
away from Abraham and all he stands for, we must go
back. We must not leave Kebem, but go back to Kebem.
"Return" is, indeed, the original meaning of "Teshuvah."
We must return to
אלוהים ויין. The only

way to achieve the proper spiritual orientation and perspective, to keep our sense of values; the only way to achieve a sense of being wanted, warm, closest to God, a sense of rootedness; the only way to arrive at an optimistic, healthful, sanguine attitude to Jewish life, and life in general--is to return to *UINAT*
Elis le, to reverse the process of *GIP ROH*
ESPN.

And to facilitate and help in that ^{great} late return is one of the chief functions of our Synagogue, and of any other genuine Orthodox Synagogue. As we stated recently, one of the three meanings of "Kodimoh" is "back to Kedem", back to *Elis le UINAT*, back to God.

If we are to escape the lot of Lot, we must heed the call of "Kodimoh", the return to God, to Torah, to tradition, to the origins of our life and the spiritual resources through which it can thrive and through which it will survive.