

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## PARSHAS LECH LECHA

### The Day Lot Lost Direction

וַיְהִי רִיב בֵּין רֹעֵי מִקְנֵה אַבְרָם וּבֵין רֹעֵי מִקְנֵה לוֹט  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל לוֹט אַל נָא תְהִי מְרִיבָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ  
 הֲלֹא כָּל הָאָרֶץ לְפָנֶיךָ הִפְרָד נָא מֵעָלַי  
 וַיִּשָּׂא לוֹט אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת כָּל כְּפַר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כְלָהּ מִשְׁקָהּ  
 וַיִּבְחַר לוֹ לוֹט אֶת כָּל כְּפַר הַיַּרְדֵּן וַיֵּסַע לוֹט מִקְדָּם

*There was a quarrel between the shepherds of Avram's flock and the shepherds of Lot's flock...*

*Avram said to Lot: "Let there please be no strife between me and you.*

*Is not all the land before you? Please, part from me."*

*Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan that it was all fertile*

*Lot chose for himself the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed from the east.<sup>1</sup>*

#### BACKGROUND: A TIME TO PART

Although Lot, Avram's nephew, originally accompanies his uncle on his journey from Charan to the Land of Canaan, at a certain point he seems to stray from Avram's program. Thus, we find him allowing his animals to graze in whichever fields they like, with the flimsy explanation that the land has been promised to Avram's descendants, which Avram does not have, so that, naturally, Lot, his nephew, stands to inherit him, in which case he is merely taking an advance on his inheritance.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a few verses later, when Hashem speaks to Avram, the Torah emphasizes that this was "after Lot had separated from him," which the Sages explain to mean that, as long as Lot was with Avram, Hashem was not prepared to communicate with him.

The matter finds its most acute expression in the concluding phrase of verse 11: "וַיֵּסַע לוֹט מִקְדָּם".

Although the straightforward translation of this phrase is, "And Lot journeyed from the east," the Sages explain that it alludes to a matter deeper than geography:

<sup>1</sup> Bereishis 13:7-11.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi to verse 7. The spurious nature of this argument is made worse by the fact that it contains a contradiction: If Lot believed Hashem's promise to Avram, he should also have believed the part which stated that Avram will have descendants, in which case they, not Lot, will inherit the land. If he did not believe Hashem's promise, then the land didn't belong to Avram at all! Either way, it didn't belong to Lot. Apparently, contradictions were no obstacle in the face of Lot justifying what he is doing. (R' Yosef Salant, *Be'er Yosef*)

הסיע עצמו מקדמונו של עולם, אמר אי אפשי לא באברם ולא באלקיו.

*“He removed himself from the Ancient One of the world [Hashem], saying, ‘I have no interest in Avram or in his God.’”*

The reason the Sages do not leave this phrase at face value is very simple. When one travels “from the east,” he is travelling west. Yet even a cursory look at a map of Israel will indicate that Sodom lies *to the east* of where Avram and Lot were, so that Lot was actually travelling from the west! Hence, the Sages conclude that there is more to this journey than one of physical direction, rendering the word “east” not as indicating geographical direction, but rather spiritual direction – away from “the Ancient One of the World.”

The question that we need to consider in all of this is: How did it happen? How did Lot go from being an adherent of Avram’s path to becoming a citizen of the most immoral city in the region? After all, in the beginning of the Parsha, Hashem appears to Avram upon his arrival in Canaan, promising the land to his descendants, even though Lot was with him at that time! Clearly, Lot was not always an impediment to Hashem speaking with Avram.

What happened to Lot?

#### ANATOMY OF A FALL

The commentators<sup>3</sup> explain that although Lot was originally an ardent follower of Avraham, events which took place in the early stages of their time in Canaan challenged his commitment, and his focus began to shift from Avraham’s mission towards other less noble goals.

The journey to Canaan was accompanied by great expectations of success and prosperity, as promised by Hashem to Avraham. However, upon their arrival, there was a famine in the land, forcing them to move temporarily to Egypt. This was one of Avraham’s famous ten tests, which he passed by being patient, forbearing, and not complaining that Hashem’s promise had not been immediately fulfilled. Lot, who had accompanied Avraham on the journey from Charan, was not as gracious in accepting this setback. Where was the prosperity that Hashem had promised Avraham?

In Egypt, there was further trouble as Sarah, Avraham’s wife — and Lot’s sister<sup>4</sup> — was taken by Pharaoh against her will, another of Avraham’s ten tests. By the time they returned to Canaan after the famine had abated, Lot’s feelings of attachment and dedication had all but expired, leading him to retract his original commitment to Avraham’s program and to develop ideas for a program of his own.

Indeed, if we lend a careful ear to the verses, we will see this shift reflected in the Torah’s description of these events. After returning from their sojourn in Egypt, the verse says that Avraham came back to the place where he had originally built a mizbeyach, and concludes with the words: “וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם אַבְרָם בְּשֵׁם ה’” – Avram called out there in the name of Hashem.” It is interesting that in the earlier verse it simply says “וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה’” – he called out in the name of Hashem,” relying on us to understand that the pronoun “he” refers to Avraham. Why, then, is Avraham mentioned explicitly by name on this later occasion?

R’ Eliezer Ashkenazi, in his classic commentary Maaseh Hashem,<sup>5</sup> explains that initially the verse uses the pronoun because, although Avraham was the primary force in spreading awareness of

3 See e.g. Hakesav ve’Hakabbalah and Malbim to Bereishis 13:14.

4 Both Sarah and Lot were children of Avraham’s brother, Haran.

5 Bereishis 13:4.

Hashem, he was accompanied and seconded in this endeavor by Lot. Sadly, however, ever since their return from Egypt, Lot had taken to missing choir practice, and hence the verse emphasizes that it was “Avraham” alone who was now spreading Hashem’s message.

### THE PLACE WHERE PSHAT AND REMEZ MEET

The picture that emerges is one where Lot was prepared to follow Avraham’s path on the understanding that it would lead him to prosperity and acclaim, but not on a path leading purely toward truth and elevated, Godly living. When these two ideas ceased being synonymous in his mind, he left.

Leaving Avraham, however, was not a simple thing; and leaving him to go to Sodom was something Lot was extremely uncomfortable doing. It is important to realize that Lot had not openly expressed his antipathy towards Avraham’s spiritual way of life. Indeed, in the verses, this is only alluded to, since within Lot himself, it was not apparent on the outside; for pshat (clearly stated) and remez (allusion) within the words of the Torah often reflect pshat (clearly visible) and remez (not readily noticeable) of the situation. Indeed, with this in mind, let us return to Lot’s trip to Sodom.

We noted that the pshat of the words “וַיֵּצֵא לוֹט מִקְדָּם” seems to indicate that he travelled westward from the east. However, that is difficult, seeing as Sodom is to the east of where he was. Therefore, we probe these words further for their remez message, which is that Lot was moving away from Hashem and Avraham. But what about the pshat? Does it just disappear in favor of more hidden messages? One of the classic commentators on Rashi, the Divrei David, explains that not only does the pshat not become *replaced by* remez, it is actually *illuminated through* remez. If Sodom was to the east, why on earth would Lot journey toward the west? The answer is, since Lot could not bring himself to have his uncle Avraham see him leaving his house and making his way toward Sodom, he actually set off in the opposite direction! This would give the impression to Avraham that Lot was heading toward some city in the west. In due time, and having made some distance between himself and Avraham’s house he veered around until he arrived in Sodom.

Not only does this idea give us a deeper insight into Lot’s journey, it is also a fascinating example of the synergy that exists between the different ways of looking at the verse.

### CONCEALED FROM WHOM?

Taking this discussion one stage further, we note that, even when describing what Lot himself saw, the verse makes explicit reference to how fertile the plains were, implying that that is what drew him toward Sodom.

In light of this, R’Yaakov Kamenetzky<sup>6</sup> explains that the full meaning of what the Sages mean to say is that Lot’s underlying motivation was concealed *even from himself!* In other words, the reason given in the verse (fertile pasture) reflects Lot’s conscious draw toward Sodom, while the allusion (moving away from Hashem toward a place of immorality) represents his unconscious motivation.

It is very interesting to note that the Hebrew word לוֹט means “concealed”. In this regard, we may say that Lot reflects a person whose true motives are often concealed, whether from others or from himself.

Taking this matter one stage deeper, it is possible that Lot’s true underlying motivation was not entirely unknown to him to the point of being completely inaccessible. Rather, he was aware of it as something which existed in his deeper levels of consciousness – and sought to keep it there! Given his original background as Avraham’s follower, Lot was not comfortable recognizing that

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6 Commentary Emes le’Yaakov Bereishis loc.cit.

he was now drawn by such base things as those which went on in Sodom, and so he “managed his awareness,” suppressing his knowledge of this motivation and preventing it from coming to the surface. In other words, he chose not to know, making the conscious decision to remain unconscious about this matter. Indeed, in this regard, the charade of first travelling west and subsequently veering around toward Sodom was potentially as much for Lot himself as it was for Avraham.

## TO KNOW AND NOT KNOW

We encounter this idea again with Lot after Sodom is destroyed and his daughters, fearing that no one is left alive in the world, decide that they need to intoxicate their father and bear children from him. On the first night, when the older daughter implements this plan, the verse concludes:

וְלֹא יָדַע בְּשֹׁכְבָהּ וּבְקוּמָהּ

*And he [Lot] was not aware of her lying down or getting up.*

Rashi comments on the fact that in the Sefer Torah, the word “וּבְקוּמָהּ” has a dot on top of it. We should note that, in general, dots accompanying a word tend to diminish its meaning. In our case, Rashi explains:

*This teaches us that when she got up, he did know, and still he did not guard himself from drinking again on the second night.*

Let us ask: How can the dot inform us that he *knew* by the time she got up when the words explicitly state that he *did not know* at any stage? How could he both know and not know the same thing? Here, too, we see that Lot was aware on some level of what had happened, yet he chose to repress that awareness, keeping it in the realms of the concealed and the unknown.

This fascinating idea may be one that is personified by Lot, but it is one that can potentially be exhibited by anyone, so that the study of Lot can be of great benefit to us in our own lives. Indeed, it may be to this that we refer in the *vidui* (confession) on Yom Kippur, when we mention sins that we have committed before Hashem “בִּיּוֹדְעִים וּבְלֹא יוֹדְעִים.” This phrase is commonly taken as referring to the victims, i.e. whether they were aware of our sins against them or not. However, perhaps it also refers to the ones who committed the sins both knowingly and unknowingly, i.e. to situations where we know there might be a problem, and respond by choosing not to know.