

Tikkun Olam & Morality: Lessons from Lot

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Lot is a puzzling character. Initially, he seems to be a loyal enough nephew to Avrohom, they have their differences and go separate ways. The next phase of his life in Sedom is hard to decipher. He chooses to live in Sedom, a city so evil it must be destroyed, but also remains above the fray enough to deserve being saved. All of this makes Lot an interesting character and looking into his specific behavior in the Sedom incident is even harder to interpret.

Ignoring the Sedom rules against hospitality, Lot invites guests into his house. When he is confronted by an angry mob he heroically tries to save his angelic guests but his strategy is to offer his own daughters to the mob intent on molesting someone. As if this bizarre act on its own was not anomalous enough, in the aftermath of being saved Lot is involved in another bizarre and disturbing tale. His two daughters, acting out of a concern that they are the only remaining people in the world, intoxicate their father and induce him to committing incest in the name of propagating the world population. There are dots over some of the words in this section (see Bereishit 19:33) which our Rabbi's tell us means that Lot was actually aware of what was occurring and did not protest (see TB Nazir 23a & Rashi). While Lot seems a confused and conflicted character, I believe there is a clear message that the Torah is trying to impart through its depiction of Sedom and Lot.

I heard from R' Shimshon Pincus tz"l that the wickedness of Sedom in how they treated others so terribly was a theological mistake. They felt that as humans we are unworthy to alter Hashem's world. Whatever station in life a person had was how G-d designed things. Helping others when they were poor or in need was wrong because it was an abrogation of G-d's will. This is why they were so against charity of any sort since - it interfered with the predicament that the poor person had been placed in by G-d. The Midrashim are full of stories about their bizarre court rulings in Sedom and Rav Pincus explained that this focus on the court is to explain that it was an error of philosophy baked in to the very fabric of the judicial system and political-social life in Sedom. Unlike previous wickedness, such as the generation of the flood, where unbridled passion caused them to be unable to control certain impulses, Sedom was a different sort of error.

In the prayer of Aleinu we use an important phrase that captures our approach to morality and justice in the world: *L'takein Olam B'Malchut Shakai* – to repair the world as G-d's kingdom. This phrase speaks to our charge to make the world a better place and for the instructions for what constitutes a better place to come from Hashem's instructions and vision of what the world should be. Sedom was *Malchut Shakai* without *L'takein Olam*, they sought to try and continue the world they felt Hashem had created, making it forbidden to change anything. In a sense, their system of morality and justice was centered on G-d but their error was not understanding that we are charged to improve the world, *L'takein Olam*.

I believe that Lot is the opposite and that can help to understand his bizarre behavior. Lot represents *L'takein Olam* without *Malchut Shakai*. Lot is always trying to do the right thing and act morally but his actions are not informed by the divine. His strange acts represent what

happens when people try to lead a “moral” life when morality is an outgrowth of societal norms. Lot wants to protect the angels in Sodom but the idea of offering up his daughters to the mob seems to make sense to him. He pushes against one aspect of the moral code that informs Sodom behavior but ultimately his G-dless morality is bizarre.

This same theme is apparent again in the incident with his daughters. When they discuss their plan to procreate with their father, they continually use the phrase “*k’derech kol haAretz*” – like the way of all the land. Their decisions, as well as Lot’s, are guided by societal norms. They wish to literally save the world but their actions for the sake of Tikun Olam are misguided without any divine guidance. The entire section of Lot and his daughters does not mention G-d’s name once.

These sections together frame an important message about our purpose in the world. We are certainly here to make a difference – to bring healing and light to the world but we do this through the guidance of the Torah, our divine instruction manual. The city of Sodom failed to understand that there is work to be done – this world is intentionally not complete. Lot failed to understand that our efforts to do this work must be informed by a divine sense of morality rather than through the ephemeral mores of society. We are enjoined not to make either mistake and as we say daily, *L’takein Olam B’Malchut Shakai*.