

כובש את יצרו

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As we all know, *Parshas Vayeira* contains the *ma'aseh* of the Ribono Shel Olam destroying the cities of סדום ועמורה. We know from the previous *parsha* that Lot decided to take up residence there when he moved away from Avraham Avinu. In spite of the fact that it had the reputation of being an amoral and decadent place, nevertheless Lot chose to move there because it was a very fertile and lucrative place to live. The Ribono Shel Olam sent the *malachim* to save Lot from the impending apocalypse, and they rushed him out of the city with the warning to not look back and gaze upon the scene of ruin. In fact, when Lot's wife did not obey and looked back, she turned into a pillar of salt. Afterwards, Lot saw that the entire area had gone up in smoke.

Then the *posuk* says, "ויהי בשחת אלקים את-ערי הככר ויזכר אלקים את אברהם וישלח את לוט מתוך ההפכה..." "ויהי בשחת אלקים את-ערי הככר ויזכר אלקים את אברהם וישלח את לוט מתוך ההפכה..." (בראשית יט, כט). Lot was saved on Avraham Avinu's account. Rashi comments that the *tova* which Lot did for Avraham was keeping the secret from Pharaoh that Sarah was really Avraham's wife, not sister. Lot enabled them to escape Mitzrayim unscathed by going along with the ruse. Because of Lot's silence in that story, he was *zoche* to be saved from Sodom.

The *meforshei haChumash* (including *Sifsei Chachomim* and *Maharal*) ask why that specific act is what saved Lot. Lot had many other *zechusim* which seem to be more prominent than keeping Avraham's secret in Mitzrayim. For example, when Avraham picked up and left his birthplace because the Ribono Shel Olam told him to, Lot went along with him. Another *zechus*, in the tradition of Avraham Avinu, was the *hachnosas orchim* he exhibited when the *malochim* arrived in Sodom. When the rest of Sodom came to take arrest them, Lot was so keen on his *hachnosas orchim* that he was willing to sacrifice his daughters instead of giving them up. The *zechus* of *gemilus chassodim* would seem to be a little more than keeping Avraham's secret.

The *Maharal* addresses this question, and כדרכו בקדש, speaks cryptically and enigmatically, and therefore I don't know if I fully understand the *tefkeit* of what he says. He says the reason Lot was saved was because he had some type of "צירוף ויחוס" to Avraham Avinu. There must have been a spiritual, deeper level bond between them to save Lot. Now we must understand how the act of keeping Avraham's secret created such an essential bond between them.

I once heard a very interesting insight from the Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim, about why that was the act which "saved" Lot. He cited the *Mishna* in *מס' אבות* which states that three characteristics distinguish a person as a *talmid* of Avraham Avinu: 1) עין טובה - a generous eye; 2) רוח נמוכה - a humble spirit; and 3) נפש שפלה. Now, we all know the simple meaning of these three things, but there is a little deeper understanding to them.

עין טובה means someone who has the ability to פרגין. I find *fargin* to be one of the most difficult words to translate from Yiddish into English. In fact, in Modern Hebrew today the word remains "לפרגין" (apparently, they didn't come up with a good translation either). What it means, basically, is that I have a generosity of spirit that I am happy with what you have. For example, if my neighbor gets a brand-new car and mine has 170,000 miles on it, instead of being jealous of him I am happy for him. He needed a new car and got it and, *Baruch Hashem*, mine runs fine. When my neighbor gets a new kitchen with all the newest appliances and other trimmings while my own is

still from the 1970s, the tendency of human beings is to be jealous or to look askance at the other person, but עין טובה means saying “*gezunter heit!*” “Enjoy it, I’m happy for you.”

חומות נפש means “humble of spirit”. We all have egos, some bigger than others. Essentially, every human being has an ego and the tendency is that ego grows. חומות נפש means that a person has the ability to hold that ego in check and to not let it get the better of him, which again, is against human nature.

חומות נפש means that a person has the ability to be מסתפק במועט. Most humans want more, more, and more. What runs the American economy and the world economy is that people need to have more items. If everybody was מסתפק במועט the economy would collapse. When people say they need all the things they do, they usually mean they want it. They don’t need every gadget, bell and whistle, but they really want them. The *midda* of נפש שפלה is to be מסתפק במועט and say, “No, I don’t need it; I’ll be fine without it.”

Each of these *middos* exemplify curbing one’s natural human desires and proclivities. Avraham Avinu was able to be כובש יצרו. That made him who he was. Therefore, the *Mishna* tells us that when a person exemplifies this ability to curb his natural desires, then he becomes a *talmid* of Avraham Avinu. Lot was a *ba’al chessed*, but what distinguished him to have *shaychus* to Avraham Avinu was to go against his grain and break out of his base human instincts. He needed to abstain from doing something he heavily desired.

The Tolner Rebbe cites his ancestor Rav Dovid’l Tolner as saying the following: People like to share secrets. If I cannot tell anybody a secret I know, it’s worthless to me. I want to tell it someone else because that empowers me, it makes me a somebody. When a person is able to keep a secret quiet, he has demonstrated the ability to conquer his instincts and beat his natural desires. With that, says the *Maharal*, he gains a *shaychus* to Avraham Avinu.

Ironically, Rav Dovid’l Tolner once told over the following interesting thing. The *posuk* says when Bnei Yisroel left Mitzrayim, “ולכל בני ישראל לא יחרץ כלב לשונו”. *Chazal* tell us that because the dogs did not bark by *Yetziyas Mitzrayim*, they were rewarded with *neveilos*- “לכלב תשלחון אותי”. Why do the dogs deserve this? Rav Dovid’l said because it is the tendency of dogs to want to bark. That is their nature. When they didn’t do so, the Ribono Shel Olam appreciated that and for *dorei doros* rewarded them.

Now we understand what happened with Avraham, Sarah, and Lot in Mitzrayim. Lot was surrounded by opportunity to be the big shot who knew the darkest secret of Avraham and his beautiful sister. Lot could have gained the spotlight and become the center of attention. But he didn’t, because he was כובש את יצרו. That is how he gained the *penimiyusdigge shaychus* to Avraham Avinu and that it the *zechus* which saved him from Sodom.

This also explains why the עשרה נסיונות, according to most Rishonim, culminated in עקידת יצחק. The pinnacle and apogee of Avraham Avinu’s עבודת ה' is doing that which went against every sinew in his body. His life and מהות was *chessed* and preached it to the whole world was tasked with *shechting* his own son. Even without the difficulty of carrying it out, imagine the hypocrisy of it. He preached about kindness every day but then will do this? That is why the עקידה was the highest *madreiga* he reached. Because he went against all of his instincts and did not do that which he wanted. That is true מסירת נפש.

The truth of the matter is that מסירת נפש doesn’t always mean making the ultimate sacrifice. For thousands of years we were called upon to do so, but *Baruch Hashem* nowadays in most countries we are not. There is different explanation of נפש in לשון קודש, and that is “desire” (“אם יש את נפשכם”). מסירת נפש can also mean to give up what a person wants. That is our legacy from Avraham Avinu. When we are called upon to do something that we really don’t want to do, that runs against our natural fibers, but we are able to overcome that, that is also מסירת נפש. Just as Avraham Avinu was כובש את יצרו by the עקידה, we too can become תלמידי אברהם אבינו and strengthen our connection to him by conquering our desires.