

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WERE LOT'S SHEPHERDS RELIGIOUS ZIONISTS?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

When Avram first set foot in the Land of Israel, that was certainly the beginning of the Redemption, the *atchalta d'genlab*. But it was also the beginning of the Exile, the *atchalta d'galuta*. G-d makes the interconnection explicit later in the parshah in the Covenant While Amongst the Pieces.

You must know that your descendants will be aliens in a land not belonging to them, and they will enslave and afflict them, four hundred years.

(Genesis 15:13)

The meaning of prophecies is often determined by subsequent events. The 400 years had multiple possible starting points; the enslavement and affliction might have lasted but a moment, or all 400 years; and *the land not belonging to them* turns out to be (mostly) Egypt, but could have been anywhere. It could even have been Canaan/Israel, which was not yet theirs.

Why enslavement in Egypt? Ramban to Genesis 12:10 suggests this was a punishment for Avraham's behavior.

Know that Avraham our father sinned a great sin inadvertently in bringing his righteous wife into a stumbling-block for sin because of his fear lest they kill him, when he should have trusted in the Name that it would save him and his wife and all that was his, because Elo-him has the power to aid and rescue. Also his leaving the Land, regarding which he had been commanded at the outset, because of the famine – that was a violation that he sinned, because Elo-him in a famine would redeem him from death. It was for this episode that the exile in the land of Egypt in the hand of Pharaoh was decreed on his descendants. In the place where sentence was

carried out, that is where the wickedness and sin took place.

Ramban does not spell out how the punishment corresponds to Avram's two sins. I suggest that the exile to Egypt corresponds to leaving the land in the face of famine, and the enslavement at the hands of Pharaoh to putting Sarah in Pharaoh's power.

The second equation seems less compelling than the first. Even in Ramban's peculiar formulation of what was wrong, Avraham sinned against Sarah more than against Pharaoh. Moreover, the descendants in question are both Avraham's and Sarah's, so the punishment actually compounds her innocent suffering.

The narrative of Genesis offers two later candidates for a moral error that might be atoned for by enslavement in Egypt. First, Sarah mistreats her Egyptian maid Hagar. Ramban admits that this was sinful, but sees its punishment as fully described in immediate context, that Hagar's son Ishmael will have the capacity to afflict the descendants of Sarah's son Isaac. Second, Yosef takes advantage of a famine to make all Egypt slaves to Pharaoh. This seems to me far and away the best fit from the standpoint of poetic justice. However, Ramban does not see Yosef's actions as an abuse of power.

Many commentators conversely challenge Ramban's contention that Avraham sinned by leaving Israel in face of famine. Are there other candidates for the sin that led to his descendants' extended exile outside the Land? I suggest that the episode of the split with Lot may be relevant.

The land did not bear them, to dwell together, because their property was vast, and they were unable to dwell together.

There was a quarrel
between the shepherds of Avram's flocks and
the shepherds of Lot's flocks,
and the Canaanites and Perizites were by then in
the land.

Avram said to Lot:

Let there please not be a quarrel
between me and you
and between my shepherds and your shepherds
because men-who-are-brothers are we.

(Genesis 13:6-8)

Rashi locates the cause of the split in the inability of Lot's shepherds to deal with the ambiguity of the Land's status.

They argued: The land has been given to Avraham, and he has no heir, so Lot will be his heir, so this is not theft. But Scripture says *but the Canaanites were then in the land*, and Avraham's rights had not yet vested.

"If it will all eventually belong to Avram", Lot's shepherds argued, "why can't we pasture where we please right now? Surely that can't be theft!" But the Torah regards it as theft.

Rashi's reading seemingly absolves Avram of any blame regarding the split. But it's plausible to see Avram as blameworthy for Lot being there in the first place. G-d commanded Avram: *Go for yourself from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house*, which may translate as a command to leave place, culture, and family. Lot was a paternal relative, so Avram should have left him behind! Indeed, G-d does not "show" Avram the *land which I will show you* until *after the separation of Lot from him*.

However, I think the simplest reading of the text holds Lot and Avram equally responsible for the quarrel, and that the quarrel itself was undesirable. I suggest that this is because Lot's information about G-d's promise, which he conveyed to his shepherds, was entirely secondhand, as Lot himself was no prophet. Lot's error therefore must result from a flaw in Avram's pedagogy. Maybe Lot couldn't handle the truth, and it was a mistake to tell him anything about the Divine promise. Or maybe Avram did not realize how the truth could be abused.

The text seems to fudge the question of whether Lot shared the error of his shepherds. The narrator refers only a quarrel among the shepherds, but Avram describes it as between himself and Lot as well. So maybe Lot himself understood the truth but was unable to convey it properly to his shepherds, and then was unwilling or unable to restrain them. Maybe Avram was responsible for not realizing that this progression was inevitable. He learns from this failure, because Yitzchak and his servants do not repeat Lot's error in Gerar. Maybe that's why G-d tells Yitzchak not to leave the Land even in a time of famine.

Talmud Kiddushin 32a raises a domestic issue analogous to Lot's error.

Rav Huna tore (valuable) fabric (of his own) in
the presence of his son Rabbah (to test him).

He said to himself: I will see whether he
becomes enraged or not.

Why would Rabbah become enraged? Because heirs are tempted to regard their parents' property as their own, even in their parents' lifetime.

This temptation doesn't lead directly to outright theft. Similarly, Lot's shepherds didn't expel the Canaanites and Perizites from their grazing grounds. But it generates a feeling that you can rightfully control how your parents spend their own money, or to not muzzling your camels when they encroach on lands that you think G-d has promised you. As with all such senses of entitlement, it feeds on itself and grows unless consciously and forcefully restrained.

Religious Zionism is a movement grounded in G-d's promise to Avram. I suggest that it is a Lot-type error to understand claims to the land based on that promise as abrogating the rights of all other residents. Those of us who identify as Religious Zionists must consciously and forcefully restrain any such sense of entitlement, especially when it is displayed by those who might reasonably be identified as our religious or political shepherds.