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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## THE FIRST DESTRUCTION OF SODOM

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

"God makes his plan; the information's not available to the mortal man." - Paul Simon, "Slip Slidin' Away"

Divine plans are adaptable. They have to be, because human beings genuinely have free will. Because we don't know G-d's plans, we can't be held accountable for not following them. We can only make choices based on what emerges as *lekhatchilah* from the decision algorithms He gave us, such as *halakhah*.

That sort of outcome-blindness seems to be His plan for us in the world. Except when it isn't. "*Am I concealing from Avraham that which I am doing?*" Why is it important for G-d that Avraham know this plan in advance?

The Torah tells us twice about the wickedness of Sodom.

In 13:13, when Lot's tent-range first reached the city, *the people of Sodom (were) bad and sinful, very much*. The next verse tells us that:

Hashem said to Avram **after the separation of Lot from him:**

Lift your eyes and see, from the place where you are there, northward and southward and eastward and westward.

Lot's attraction to Sodom explains why he was a spiritual drag on Avram. G-d commanded Avram to *go from your father's house and promised that Avraham would do well in the land that I will show you*. Parting ways with his nephew, child of his father's house, led to G-d showing him the Land. But Avram and Lot's ranges still bordered, and so their lives were still intertwined.

Shortly thereafter, the Four Kings captured Sodom.

They took all the wealth of Sodom and Amora, and all their food,  
and they went away.

They took Lot and all his wealth – the son of Avram's brother –  
and they went away.  
He was settled in Sodom.

RaDaK comments:

*And [all] their food – that they had in houses, and they took the people as booty.*

There is little if any evidence for RaDaK's assertion that the Four Kings took prisoners other than Lot. By contrast, Malbim and others plausibly suggest instead that Lot alone remained in Sodom during the war rather than going out to battle. He was still

a tent-dweller and did not see himself as a citizen. He had no quarrel with the returning overlords.

Nonetheless, the Four Kings took as captive *the son of Avram's brother*. Commentaries dispute whether they took him **because** he was Avram's nephew, out of religious spite or in hopes of a rich ransom, or rather **despite** his being Avram's nephew, when they should have respected Avram's virtue or feared his power. Tzror HaMor suggests that the *palit* who informs Avram of Lot's capture was doing the Four Kings' bidding. They wanted him to follow after them.

Ibn Caspi, however, contends that the Torah is not interested in the Four Kings' motivation. Rather, identifying Lot as *the son of Avram's brother* prepares us for Avram's reaction, which is grounded in his continuing emotional connection to his father's house. This motivates him to immediately organize and lead a rescue operation that succeeds brilliantly and apparently undoes all the effects of the previous battle.

Let's consider those effects, and how we should evaluate the consequences of undoing them.

The victory of the Four Kings deposed Sodom's king. Remember that *the people of Sodom (were) bad and sinful, very much*. New leadership might have offered the population and culture a chance to start over. Removing all the city's property, including even its food, would naturally have led to emigration and depopulation.

Lot's captivity removed him from the influence of that city's culture. It also potentially removed him completely from Avram's life.

Avram's victory restored the King of Sodom to his throne and returned the population and Lot to the city. While he refused any spoils for himself, Avram offered no compensation for what his lads had already consumed, and he awarded Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei their shares. If Avram was entitled to take everything, their shares may have added up to 75%.

Lot's property presumably was not considered spoils. He therefore became the richest man in the city. He buys a large and defensible house.

This brings us to 18:17-20:

Hashem had said:

Am I concealing from Avraham what I am doing?

But Avraham will certainly become a nation great and powerful,  
 through whom all nations of the world will be blessed.  
 So Hashem said:  
 The outcry of Sodom and Gomorra - because it is great,  
 and its sin – because it is very grave,  
 I will go down and see . . .

Restoration Era Sodom turned out more evil and more sinful than its predecessor.

G-d had previously concealed from Avraham what He was doing, namely sending the Four Kings to destroy Sodom and exile Lot. But that turned out badly. Avram made the reasonable and virtuous decision to rescue his nephew. But the consequences of Avraham's raid to rescue Lot were the further degradation of Sodom's culture and Lot's full immersion within that culture.

Moreover, Lot's new prominence may have contributed to Sodom's deterioration. The weakened king may have stoked xenophobia as a political tactic and incited the mob against the usurper Lot. *They said: This one (originally) came to sojourn, but he became a judge/ chieftain; now we will do worse to you than them.* As evidenced by the allusions to Sodom in the story of the Concubine in Giv'ah (Shoftim Chapters 18-21), the collapse of public order may be the worst of all cultural conditions.<sup>1</sup>

So Avraham defended Sodom not only out of instinctual sympathy, but also to prevent his legacy from literally turning into ashes. And then he went to sleep!

Bereishis 19:27-28:

Avraham woke early the morning after,  
 toward the place where he had confronted Hashem  
 (or: where he had stood there in the face of Hashem).  
 He looked out over the face of Sodom and Gomorrah, and  
 over the face of all the plainland.  
 He saw, and behold! The smoke-plume of the land rose like  
 the smoke-plume of an industrial furnace.  
 וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-עָמַד שָׁם אֶת-פְּנֵי יְקוֹק;  
 וַיִּשְׁלַח עַל-פְּנֵי סוּדָם וְעַל-פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ הַכְּפֹר  
 וַיֵּרָא וְהִגִּיד עֲלֵהּ קִיטָר הָאֶרֶץ כְּקִיטָר הַכְּבֹשֶׁן:

How did Avraham sleep while waiting for G-d's verdict? Rambam gives the simplest answer. The dialogue between G-d and Avraham about Sodom took place in a dream. Furthermore, the Torah's description of that destruction is the narration of a dream.

Rambam fits smoothly with naturalistic explanations of the destruction. Fire and brimstone raining from Heaven were the way Avraham's religiously primed unconscious mind encoded G-d's wrath. He awoke and rushed to see whether his nightmare had a real-world parallel. It did.

Abравanel goes further, suggesting that Avraham's morning return is to his dream rather than to the place he dreamed of. He contends that the Torah's narrative of Lot's escape from Sodom is also part of that dream, although it, too, has a real-world parallel.

That is a bridge too far for me. I read the account of Lot's escape as breaking continuity via flashback.

It was during G-d's destruction of the cities of the plain  
 G-d remembered Avraham  
 He sent Lot from the midst of the overturning  
 during the overturning of the cities in which Lot had  
 dwelled.

וַיְהִי בְשַׁחַת אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-עַרְי הַכְּפֹר  
 וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-אַבְרָהָם  
 וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת-לוֹט מִתּוֹךְ הַהֲפָכָה  
 בַּהֲפֹךְ אֶת-הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר-יָשַׁב בְּהֵן לוֹט:

Abравanel's reading also resolves what I see as a necessary ambiguity: when (if ever) Avraham learns that Lot has survived. I think that if Avraham had known of Lot's survival, he would have been onsite the next day to bring him home.

The second destruction of Sodom is total. The people are killed, not merely dispersed; the political structure ceases to exist; and the land itself becomes poisonous. If I am correct, Avram believes that Lot is dead. All this became necessary only because Avram defeated the Four Kings and retrieved Lot.

But that is not entirely fair. What if Avram had defeated the Four Kings and then told the King of Sodom to go away, because he was taking responsibility for the people? G-d's plans are adaptable. Perhaps Avram could have positively transformed their culture and made its destruction unnecessary.

Or maybe that too would have gone badly. Maybe Lot would have traded on his connection to Avraham in corrupt oppressive ways, generating a backlash and bottomless cynicism about do-gooders.

Unlike Avraham, we do not ever have the advantage of knowing G-d's plans. Our most virtuous and halakhically ideal actions can therefore have terrible consequences. Moreover, whether a choice turns out well may depend entirely on how well we make the next choice, and so on ad infinitum. Or on how well other people make their next choices.

Until Redemption happens, and maybe even after, we cannot know which human choices brought it closer, and which delayed it. Our plans, and our criticisms of others' plans, should be made in humble awareness of this indeterminacy.

<sup>1</sup> Note that some midrashim present a very different image of Sodom. That image is a satiric self-reflection, showing how a rule-bound culture can use both enforcement of the law and its evasion through loopholes as tools of oppression. See <https://moderntoraleadership.wordpress.com/2016/11/17/bully-for-sodom/>.