

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayera  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Parashat Vayera – He who hesitates is lost

In last week's Parasha of Lech Lecha we discussed Lot's attachment to his possessions. This week we continue this theme by examining Lot's connection to his property and how it almost cost him his life!

In this week's Parasha of Vayera, we read about the three angels that came to visit Avraham. Hashem then informed Avraham that He was planning to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with their surrounding villages. Avraham tried unsuccessfully to argue in their defence. Before Hashem destroyed Sodom, He gave Avraham's nephew Lot a chance to escape with his family. The angels came down to Sodom to execute judgement and Lot invited them into his house. When the inhabitants of Sodom tried to gain access to the visitors, Lot valiantly protected them, and the angels struck the inhabitants with blindness. The angels then told Lot about the upcoming destruction of the city and Lot tried to convince his sons-in law to escape with him. But they just laughed at him. As the time for the destruction drew near, the angels encouraged Lot to move quickly: "Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you perish due to the sin of the city".<sup>1</sup> The Torah describes Lot's response:

*“But he hesitated (וַיִּתְמַהֵמַה), so the men [i.e., the angels] took hold of his hand and his wife's hand and the hand of his two daughters, because Hashem had pity on him, and they took them out and placed them outside of the city” (Breishit 19:16)*

The trope (the musical note) that appears above the word “hesitated” is called “shalsholet”. The shalsholet only appears four times in the Torah<sup>2</sup>. The baal koreh is required to sing this word up and down, up and down, up and down. It sounds as if he is stuck and cannot move on to the next word. The sound of the note is very appropriate. Each time, the note is associated with a person who is engaging in an inner struggle and is vacillating over what to do. In Lot's case though, his struggle and hesitation seems nonsensical. The city was about to be destroyed and Lot had to flee for his life. Why on earth did he hesitate?

Rashi tells us the reason, based on the Midrash:<sup>3</sup> “in order to save his possessions”! Here is a man who is about to be killed and all he can think about is his bank account! The Midrash describes it more graphically:

*This is unbelievable! He is saying “what a waste of silver and gold, precious stones and pearls”. About this person the pasuk (Kohelet 5:12) states “riches are hoarded by their owner to his misfortune”. Rebbi Yehoshua ben Levi says that this pasuk is referring to Lot.<sup>4</sup>*

Certainly, Lot knew that the angels meant business. He saw that they were able to strike all of the male inhabitants of Sodom with blindness. He begged his sons-in-law to flee with him. He understood that the city was about to be overturned and that everyone in it would be wiped out. And yet, at the pivotal moment, he hesitated. He was reluctant to part with his gold. This shows that someone can be so attached to their possessions that they value their possessions above their own life!

<sup>1</sup> Breishit 19:15.

<sup>2</sup> The other times are when Eliezer prayed to Hashem for help to find a wife for Yitzchak (Breishit 24:12), when Yosef responded to the overtures of Potiphar's wife (Breishit 39:8) and when Moshe inaugurated Aharon as the Kohen Gadol (Vayikra 8:23).

<sup>3</sup> Breishit Rabbah 50:11.

<sup>4</sup> Other opinions are brought as to who this pasuk could be referring to, including Korach, Haman, and the tribes of Reuven and Gad (who requested permission to stay on the other side of the Jordan River and not enter the land of Israel because they had abundant flocks).

We see a similar concept referred to in the text of the Shema. The Gemara in Pesachim<sup>5</sup> teaches as follows:

It was taught in a Baraita that Rebbe Eliezer says, why does the Torah say that one should love Hashem with “all of your soul and with all of your possessions”<sup>6</sup>? To teach you that if there is a person whose life is more precious to him than his money, then the greatest sacrifice he could make is to give up his life, as it states - with all your soul (בכל נפשך); and if there is a person whose **money is more precious to him than his life**, the Torah states – with all of your possessions (בכל מאדך), meaning that you should give up everything you own for the love of Hashem.

If someone was offered a stark choice between their money or their life, any sane person would choose their life. But if someone has an unusually strong attraction to their money, they may hesitate and ponder whether their life was really and truly under threat.

How attached are we to our possessions? We may delude ourselves into thinking that we do not value our possession too much, but then we might make a comment that reveals the truth. Consider the following true story<sup>7</sup>:

*Tensions were mounting. The technology start-up company had enormous potential but was very low on cash. The proposed capital raising was desperately needed. The corporate adviser that was running the deal was super keen to get this mandate and had been full of promises at the beginning. However, strangely, they had gone quiet. They were not returning phone calls or emails. Something was clearly wrong. Eventually we discovered the truth. John, the managing partner, who was also the driving force behind the deal, had suffered a serious heart-attack. While he was recovering in hospital, the rest of the team struggled to keep on top of things. The following is a transcript of the first conference call that took place after the news had been leaked about John:*

*Mark (John’s deputy): “I have to apologise about our lack of responsiveness over the last couple of weeks. By now you have all heard the news about John. I want to assure you that we are up and running again and we are ready to move full steam ahead with the capital raising.”*

*Richard (the CEO of the tech company): “Thanks Mark. The main thing, of course, is that John should have a speedy recovery.”*

*Mark: “No Richard, heh heh, the main thing is that we all make money out of this deal!”*

*Awkward silence...*

Though Mark was just joking, there is often some truth in every joke. Mark’s comment belies the ruthless attitude that people often have towards making money. With such a focus on money, it is almost inevitable that their middot, ethics and ultimately mitzvot will suffer. And a complete reverence for money and possessions is akin to idol worship. Instead of loving Hashem with all their possessions, they love their possessions with G-d-like fervour.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Take an honest look at how important our possessions are to you. We can monitor the topic of our thoughts when our minds wander and we see what we think about.
2. Try to imagine that we are in Lot’s situation. What possessions would we be upset about losing? How hard would it be for us to leave our place of residence without taking anything with us?
3. Work on increasing our value of Hashem, spirituality and the Torah way and decreasing our value of materialism. One way to do this might be to catch yourself when your thoughts wander to your possessions and replace these thoughts with those of a spiritual nature.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> Daf 25a.

<sup>6</sup> Devarim 6:5.

<sup>7</sup> I know that this story is true because I was on the call. Names have been changed to protect the innocent (and the guilty).